THE KILLING FROST

BOSTON ATHENÆUM

From the income of the bequest of

George Francis Parkman

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A Proprietor of the Boston Athenæum

THE KILLING FROST

By the same Author

—

THEY WALK ALONE (*Play*) 1939
THE FLANAGAN BOY 1949

THE KILLING FROST

by

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This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hope, to-morrow blossoms . . .
The third day comes a frost; a killing frost.

SHAKESPEARE
(*Henry VIII*)

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THE ACCUSED

The warder leaned over and gently touched the young man's arm. "Dreaming?"

Tino roused himself. He laughed. "Sure. Was dreaming!" He looked down at the chess board, putting one hand on his brow to shield his eyes from the glare of the naked lamp that glittered above. It was with some effort that he concentrated on the pieces; and when his hand went out to the white pawn it was without assurance. He leaned back and smiled at the two warders tiredly. "Pawn on Queen's four?"

"Try it," said the warder.

"You're a smart player, Tom."

"Oh, catching up, you know, Tino. Catching up."

"Maybe later. Eh?"

"Just as you wish."

"That lamp hurts. It's so bright. I don't suppose . . .?"

"Sorry."

Tino nodded apologetically. "Of course. All right. We'll give the game a little rest."

Then, as all three relaxed, Tino sat back and looked at his companions reflectively. During the three weeks in which he had lived in this harsh little room he had cultivated with them —and with the other two details of warders, a pair of them to a shift—an intimacy that to him was touching; touching, perhaps, because it was fleeting. On their side it was strained, they sought with a clumsy sense of official awareness to be both considerate and cautious; but a natural compassion welled out of them that expressed itself in their uneasy eyes. They rarely met his glance directly. But when they felt that he was not conscious of it they watched him, sidelong, with blank discomposed stares. Tino was aware of the intolerable burden

that rested on them. For his part, he was at ease; he only wished that the spectre that dwelt amongst them could be talked about a little so that he might make them understand that he was not afraid—once they understood, they might ease out of it and a nicer atmosphere could come into the cell. But he knew better than to suggest it. They had their instructions; in any case, he guessed, the very thought would have revolted them. He chuckled. It was a situation that had a grim humour all of its own.

He said, "Tom, any beer left over from lunch?"

"A drain. It'll be flat."

"You want it, Tom?"

"No, no. Go ahead. Alan, give Tino the beer."

The warder named Alan gave Tino the mug. Tom half smiled, "Beer isn't what it used to be, anyway." He made a motion up with his thumb. "Down the hatch!" Tino winked. He drank, catching momentarily their opaque eyes over the rim of the mug. If he took his attention away from them for only a moment their eyes instantly took on that blank guarded strain. Tino sighed. It was a pity. Something was living in the cell with them all the time and they would never be at ease.

He said, "Tom, I hear from Jack"—Jack was one of the warders on another shift—"you going to have a kid. O.K. for me to talk about it?"

"Why not?"

"How soon?"

"Five months."

"Your first?"

"The very first."

"Marvellous thing to have, a kid. A couple's not really married till they have two, three, maybe four, knocking about the house. You ought to be excited, Tom."

"You think I'm not?"

"You look so calm. So placid."

"Well, you know how it is. Let it get closer and I dare say I'll get a bit worked up."

"Boy for you, eh?"

"I'd like a boy."

"Fine. Fine. A boy is fine. You know I got one? A kid. A boy?"

"Yes, Tino."

"Haven't seen much of it. Was only six days old when they took me away. Got black hair, thick black hair, no kidding, and eyes blue as—as the sea off Italy. More blue! I got a little statue, a madonna, at home, with a blue sky in enamel behind the Virgin's head. Bluest thing you ever saw. Well, my kid's eyes is bluer. Bluer! And skin like a peach. Soft and hairy." Tino's voice breathed away. "Oh, a beautiful kid."

Then he stole a shy look at them and at once his shining eyes clouded. The old caution was back. Alan moved awkwardly to put the empty mug away; Tom made a casual gesture over the chess board; and Tino looked at both distressfully. It was saddening how many subjects they made him feel were taboo. So his kid had only been six days old when they had arrested him—he could still feel the struggling welter of emotion when he had first set eyes on it, the stupid tears, the uncontrolled movement of his gullet, strangling a little for words. Why not talk about it? It was probably the most beautiful of all the memories he had. Then, wryly, he smiled. It was simpler to take their subtle hints as to what it was good to chat about than to force his unwelcome conversation on men who, out of compassion and discomfort, could not easily respond. It was a subject too closely linked with his arrest: with his presence in this tight little room. He changed the subject breezily.

"How about a nice book to read, Tom?"

"Say the word."

"Something exciting. That book you got for me yesterday was too much about love. Not real love. Drippy love. You know?"

"Well, now. How about a good sea story?"

"No, if you please, a nice thriller, Tom."

Tom said coolly, "We don't have the kind of thrillers you want."

"Not allowed?"

"Put it that way: not allowed."

"I understand. A pity. A sea story, then. Later will do. Just now I'll try to get some sleep."

And he went over to the bed, a firmly sprung bed, with its clean stiff sheets and coarse grey blankets, and lay down on it. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling with the edge of his hand placed against his brow so that his palm shielded his eyes from the omnipresent glare of the naked lamp. He lay quite still, noting that Tom was making in his register a little entry: every action of Tino's went into that book. It had amused him at first, now it had become as habitual to him as it had to the warders who made those official records of the final days of his life. The subjects of his conversation were noted in it, Tino knew—his appetite, his interest in his meals, each visit to the toilet, his sleeps, his snatches at a cigarette, his times of rising, his exercise periods and the games he played. He had asked for a thriller: he had been offered a sea story. Both facts were duly recorded for the Governor. Tino chuckled, "Put it away, Tom. I give you too much writing to do."

"Oh, we don't mind."

"I'd like to read that sometime. Would make a better thriller than lots of the stuff I used to read."

"Dull as ditchwater, Tino!"

"Yes? You kidding." And Tino turned on his side, away from the wall, rested comfortably and looked vaguely round the room. Its shape and the glow of its walls, the position of every fitment, were pressed indelibly into his mind. He had had twenty days in which to become familiar with it; he had merged into it physically. It was about twelve feet square. It had a harsh cleanliness. The walls were painted cream and shone glassily, like a steamed bathroom, in the ceiling light. There was a plain deal table and three hard chairs, two occupied by his ever-present companions, the detail of warders on the varying shifts. Set in the corner, triangular fashion, was a wooden stand with shelves on which rested his toilet things: and these shelves, which he washed daily, had been worn bone-white by the scrubbings of the scores of prisoners who, like him, had passed briefly through that cell. Sometimes these ghosts, these previous occupants, went dimly through his

mind with a warm familiarity—he saw none of them clearly, they were shapes, disembodied whispers, no more, who had burned like a flickering candle within these confining walls until at the appointed time the law, with due formality, leaned forward and firmly blew it out. His own candle of a measured twenty-one days had burned away twenty. He would not be distressed when it was finally snuffed. High up in one of the walls was a frosted window; through the dim glass, shadowed behind by three bars, he could note the change of the day. But it was mid-winter and the light came through feebly so that he could not easily tell, when the afternoon's light died, how soon it merged into night. He kept track of the time through the kindly warders, watching the passing of the days, not with a fluttering uneasiness, but with an aloof surgical interest. When they had taken him out of the court as the trial ended, the very last thing he had looked at was the round moonlike face of the clock. It hung between tall lancet windows, and the grey light that came pencilling in faintly dazzled him; but he saw the fingers pointing to a little before the hour of four—he had noted it mechanically as the beginning of the final lap: with the dim recollection of the judge's words, "That you be taken from this place to a lawful prison and thence to the place of execution, that you be there hanged by the neck until you be dead and that your body be afterwards buried within the precincts of the prison." It did not sound half so dreadful when you had repeated it—as had Tino—about a hundred times to yourself. A compassionate man, that judge: Tino had liked him: with his papery withered face and the beady aged eyes—his voice less steady than it had been as someone leaned apologetically over his shoulder and laid a small black patch on his wig. An incredibly old gentleman, his years behind him, sending to his death a young man in the exultant flush of life. Then the warder had touched Tino's arm, turned, and both passed into the lime-washed brick corridor below. Twenty days gone: this one night left. Tino's eyes wandered on. He saw the three doors in the room. One led to the corridor, it was through this that he had arrived with the two warders who had formed the first of the shifts; it had a grille in it, shoulder high,

through which the Chief Officer and the Officer of the Watch inspected him and the two watching warders at intervals during the night. The second door was small and led to the toilet. The third he had never yet seen opened. He could not but guess what it led to; and he had noted that the warders who sat with him endeavoured, not pointedly, but with embarrassed indifference, to sit on their hard wooden chairs with their backs to it.

When Tino turned on his side, both warders immediately looked up. They were quick to observe his movements. When he lay down they read, but often he saw them staring at him remotely over the tops of their books. Tino chuckled. "Let's talk about something, Alan. You, too, Tom. What?"

"Choose your own weapons, Tino," smiled Tom.

"You bored with me?"

"Tino, don't say that."

"Alan, you got children. You ever take 'em to a circus?"

"Bet your life. My youngsters go for a circus. Come Christmas, we'll take 'em up to town. They've got a rattling big one at the Stadium."

"I meant a real circus. A travelling circus. That's what I came out of. Now that'd give your kiddies fun."

"Damn sure."

"You never saw me, of course?"

"No, Tino. Acrobat, weren't you?"

"Trapeze artiste." Tino grinned. "Is all the same. I did a good act. Oh, needs lots and lots of work. Months you practise to get just right a single spin. Got to be right—you don't play tricks with your body up there."

"You must have been good."

"All right, Tom. Pretty all right."

"Once saw a chap do one of those swings from a trapeze to a chap hanging by his knees . . ."

Tino sat up. His eyes gleamed. There was a little colour in his face.

"Tom, is elementary. Is what a trapezist teaches his kiddies when they get so high! Now you want to see a double *salto mortale*. That's something, Tom. A double somersault in the

air before you reach for your partner's hands. And more things like that. Oh, it's a hard life! But a wonderful one. My father and mother were trapezists. They run a wine shop in Soho now. But in their prime—not a circus in Europe didn't bid for them. Travelled everywhere. Germany, France, Hungary. Always on the move. I grew up smelling sawdust. Used to run out with the horses when I was a nipper, in a nice velvet suit, was my first circus job. Can you imagine? Then I went in with the clowns. I was only twelve. Some fun! Then my papa says, 'Now you start to learn. One day he points up to the trapeze. 'Up there, Tino. You start to swing!' "

Tino's eyes shone. The two warders watched him, transfixed.

"Every day for years. Somersaulting, swinging, making my first leap—gosh, I was frightened. But then I look at my papa's big strong hands that are going to catch me and his proud face and I think to myself, I am safe with him. And then I look back over my shoulder at mama, standing on the platform with her hand on the ropes and I see fear in her face and worry, but a lot of encouragement too. So I think, better not shame them. No! I swing. I take it longer and longer, then I take the bar with my knees. I leap. I spin. By Golly, is easy! There I am, swinging high up, hanging on to papa's wrists, and he says, 'All right, Tino. Not bad. But don't clutch. My hands is ready. Take them. Don't grab. We make you a trapezist yet.' "

Tino's face was flushed. He sat there on the bed, hugging his knees.

"Damned exciting life, Tino," said Alan. He had never shown such awed interest before.

"Is different from anything you know. You do your job in front of a thousand eyes, high up on top of the tent, you hear them, like every crowd, then you begin and at once it is quiet—so quiet that when you swing it is as if all of them suddenly have died. But they are there. Watching. With their hearts in their mouths. You finish. And then they roar. You are happy, you have done a dangerous thing and you are filled with triumph. It is your job, well done, you have given them excitement and happiness—and you are proud that your body

is so good that it does the things you demand of it. Your arms, your muscles, your eyes—they have worked together well and you have performed something not one in a million could do. You take your bow, sweating, happy, slide down and run off. A pretty full life. Eh? And all day you live with the smell of sawdust in your nostrils, the funny sounds of the animals in your ears, the roars in the night, the screams—comes a day you move on, strike the tent, pack up! and off the circus goes. . . . Another town. Another bit of life. All different. Same crowds. Same acts. But different, every one!"

Here, Tino finished. Tom stirred with a scrape of his chair. He had not moved a muscle during all this.

"Sooner have my game, Tino."

"Yes, Tom?"

"By George: swinging from bits of rope and bars up there? Enough to put the fear of God in anyone. I'd rather keep my bones stuck together the way they are."

"Oh, is not so hard when you know how. Have to have a good body—and good eyes. Good judgment."

"Easier ways of making a living, I always say."

Tino said softly, "But not such exciting ones."

Then the Officer of the Watch passed by and made a gentle little sound at the grille. They heard the cautious iron scrape. They stilled. The soft footsteps passed on.

"Dry from talking," said Tino. "How about a cigarette, Alan?"

"Now, Tino," Alan said reproachfully, "you've used six of your ten. Quite a time to go."

Tom dipped into his pocket abruptly.

"Here, don't go broadcasting this. Have one of mine."

"Sure, Tom?"

"Go on. For Christ's sake. One cigarette won't break my bank."

"O.K. Keep it quiet."

Tino lit the cigarette. He drew in the smoke and watched the exhaled blue cloud eddy in the unstirring air toward the glitter of the lamp.

"I broke my back, you know."

"No?"

"Sure. Accident. Fell. Missed the net. *Zump!* Was a miracle I'm still alive."

Then, knowing that again he had drifted on to a dangerous track—it was a poignant thing how you had to watch your tongue, to keep from it the casual chatter of "being alive by a miracle": knowing the "fear of death": what other people would be doing at Christmas when he would be gone—Tino grew abashed and stole a fleeting glance at the two men. They waited quietly for him to speak. But the little spark of intimacy had gone. Tino rolled over on to his other side. "Now I'll sleep."

"Good idea, Tino."

Tino winked.

"See nobody comes in and disturbs me, eh?"

And he heard Tom's husky chuckle, "Right, Tino. We'll see to that."

He awoke with a slight start, feeling that he had slept a considerable time. He turned slightly, screening his eyes against the light, looking over his shoulder to see if the warders had been changed. They had. It was Harry who was now sitting at the table, idly shuffling some cards, and Leonard who was reading a book with his back, as always, so stiffly erect in his chair that your own shoulders ached in sympathy. Leonard read with the bleak indifference of one who finds the febrile imagination of a novelist a poor substitute for the harsh realities of life. Harry was softer. He was a good-natured man, running to fat; the collar of his uniform seemed for ever to be pinching his raw red throat. He always chatted easily with Tino, with the affable fluency of a publican watching his bar to see that the conversation was steered clear of argumentative points. He was married. Leonard was single. He was newer to the prison service, an ex-N.C.O. who had completed his time and had been relegated when hostilities came to an end. There was a remote frostiness about Leonard; the hard wall of the disciplinarian's reserve. He rarely joined in the conversation, he answered civilly when Tino spoke to him, but it was in cool monosyllables that gave no encouragement to

unnecessary chat. His eyes were small and sharp and very bright. They were neither friendly nor hostile; they were unconcerned. But whereas, when they thought they were not being observed, the other warders occasionally showed embarrassment and discomfort, Leonard's expression was collected from the moment he entered the cell to the moment he went. It distressed Tino. He wanted to enjoy some communion with the few fellow-men he was to see in the little time he had left. Then it occurred to him that Leonard's frigidity covered a simmering dislike. It showed itself once in a sultry sparkle in Leonard's slaty-grey eyes when Tino mentioned that he'd fought with the Italian army in North Africa. Leonard had been through that campaign. He would not talk about it, but for a moment or two he had looked at Tino with the contemptuous glare of an old N.C.O. exulting privately at seeing an ex-enemy here.

Both warders stared at Tino as he moved. Harry smiled.

"Had a good nap?"

"It was nice." Tino stretched. "What are you reading, Leonard?"

"A book."

"Yes. You wouldn't be reading the back of a plate. What is the book?"

Leonard closed it without a word and put it down. Harry glanced at him sourly, took the book and showed the cover to Tino.

"You like love stories, Leonard?" Tino asked. He seemed faintly surprised.

"They're rubbish."

"Not when they have feeling. When they dig deep and truly into the human heart. Then they can have beauty."

"That's your opinion. My opinion is, when you get down into the human heart it's not the pretty thing those damned writers pretend to see. Most men and women are alike. All out for themselves."

Harry's face puckered. (What could you do with a stony-faced bastard like that?) "That's a nice bit of talk to brighten up a dull afternoon!"

"He asked me, didn't he?"

"I'll bet you had your spot of fun when you were overseas. Maybe you found a bit of love a nice piece of cake then."

"Maybe."

"So who's talking?"

"I knew what I was at. I took what I wanted and when I'd finished the girl meant no more to me than the back of this chair. Less. She'd degraded herself and degraded me. I've got no use for the whole lot of 'em."

"Some Romeo."

"Women. You know what I think of 'em."

"Not women," said Tino gently. "People. You don't like people, do you, Leonard?"

But Leonard answered coolly, "They're all right in their place. Tell 'em what to do, and so long as they jump to it they're all right." Then he glanced impassively at his watch. "Time for exercise."

Tino curled.

"Five minutes, yes?"

"Now's the time."

"Oh, pipe down," said Harry. His plump face was flushing. "Talkin' like a damn sergeant-major! Tino's not in the old Fusiliers." It was on the tip of his tongue to say angrily that it was Tino's last afternoon and if he wanted to stretch like a warm pussy-cat on his bed for another five minutes he couldn't see why this damned barrack-room touch had to be shoved in.

"Couple of minutes," said Tino apologetically. "Yes, Leonard? Then we'll have our walk."

Leonard said nothing. He picked up the book. Nothing in his face had moved.

"Love," said Tino softly. He lay staring up. "It doesn't degrade. Lust, perhaps. But love? No. It takes a man and shows him the meaning of life. He can walk with his head in the clouds, like an angel, he can look down upon other men with the bliss of a transported being—he knows wonder and despair and anguish and joy, but if he died to-morrow because of it he could still say, it's been worth it, just to live through this." Tino laughed nervously. He had said too much.

Quickly, he got up. He straightened his collar, drew on his jacket and waited mildly for Leonard to rise.

"Right. Let's go."

Harry unlocked the cell door, the two warders, with Tino between them, walked down the stone-flagged corridor and into the yard. There they began to make a slow circle in a particular corner under the high wall. That this corner had been chosen because it was not overlooked by the cell windows Tino was aware. Since he entered the prison he had not set eyes on another inmate. He knew his six warders, the Governor and the Doctor. Beyond them, the rest of humanity might have perished from the face of the earth. They trudged slowly, in a restricted circle, Tino with his head down, Harry looking around sombrely, his keys jangling at his hip, Leonard staring straight ahead; even at that slow pace he walked with a measured barrack-square step, toes pointed to the flags, each stride crisp and precise. The cadence of his walk annoyed Harry, who turned his head at times to glance at his fellow-warder irritably. It was Leonard who first spoke.

"What did you mean just then?"

Harry asked, "Me?"

Leonard's elbow brushed Tino. "Him."

"Did I say something?" inquired Tino.

"That stuff about women. And love."

"It was nothing."

"You felt that way about a girl?"

"Once."

"Your wife?"

Tino's glance fell once more to the flags.

"Before I was married. No. Not my wife."

"She did all that to you?"

"And more. She is dead."

Harry's eyes were furious. He stared sulphurously at Leonard and for a moment he half-opened his mouth to speak: he was so angry that the keys, gripped in his big red hand, made a tremulous tinkling noise; it was like the menacing rattle of a snake. He said, "One o' these days, Len, you'll learn to keep your big mouth shut. Catch on?" Leonard

should have known as well as he who that girl was.

But Leonard's eyes mocked him.

"No harm in asking."

"Watch your tongue or I'll pass it on to the Governor."

They did not speak again.

But Tino heard this exchange, detached. He had ceased to think back; when he entered the prison all memory ended. Neither did he think ahead. He dwelt mildly on the present; it was all he had, these fleeting moments that were ticking away from his diminishing stock. Time was now the only commodity he possessed; and while he did not clutch at it, waiting for the dregs of it with despair, he found a strange peace in existing totally in the present, making a blank of yesterday and never giving to-morrow a thought. It was only when he looked up at the sky, at the steely-grey wintry clouds, flecked with the red of approaching evening, that he felt a pang. He stopped. The warders paused at his side. They looked at him uncertainly. Tino stared up. For a moment his face was dim and incredulous; there was a frozen beauty about the heavy massed clouds, moving with a sombre dignity, edged with pink, deepening to a livid glare where the sun had dropped. It was cold. Tino shivered; but it was a poignant sort of tremor, it was suddenly incomprehensible to him that he would not see it again: nor the sun rise, nor a spring, nor a summer, nor another flake of snow. There was something totally frightening about extinction. He laughed, but distressfully.

"Cold?" Harry asked awkwardly.

"Very cold."

"Keep moving," said Leonard.

They moved on and Tino did not look up again at the sky.

Presently, Harry nodded, they returned to the prison building, entered the corridor and went into the cell. Harry locked the door. Both warders removed their caps. They sat, Harry fingering idly the cards once more, Leonard opening his book and reading, head back, staring disparagingly at the pages down his nose. Tino stood hesitantly by the bed. Of a sudden, he was conscious of the third door as he had never been before. He sat, turning his back to it. He drooped in the

chair, sitting with his hands loose between his knees. A flood of memories, held back for so long, had suddenly engulfed him. It had been that last glimpse of the sky: the finality of the hesitant stand in the corridor, staring back fleetingly before Leonard nudged him on. Soon his memories would be gone like that. Another hand, soon, would nudge him much further on. He found it a little difficult to sit, there was a film of sweat on his hands and when now and again he looked up to meet Harry's eyes, he could no longer smile; it was an effort to twist hauntedly the muscles of his face. He realised reluctantly that his eyes were full of tears.

He returned to his bed and lay with his face to the wall.

Later the doctor came in and examined him. Neither spoke. The doctor nodded, murmured something to Harry and left. Harry made an entry in the log-book. A few moments later, the evening meal arrived. It was palatable, meat and potatoes, a fruit sweet and a large mug of tea. Tino sat. The meat had been cut for him into small portions so that he had no need for more than his spoon. He was not permitted a knife. There was a tankard of beer, but when, the froth sinking perceptibly, Harry motioned to it, Tino shook his head and faintly smiled. He ate without speaking. The cell was hushed. Little sound entered it. When he had finished, he asked for a cigarette. Harry gave him one. Tino smoked. During all this—the doctor's entry, the arrival of the meal, Tino's eating of it, Leonard had barely stirred. Only occasionally did his eyes rise above the top of his book to scrutinise Tino remotely. When Tino had finished his cigarette, he entered the toilet, Harry going in with him; then he came back, changed into his thick grey pyjamas and sat on the edge of the bed. He was calmer now.

He said abruptly—yet shyly, "Harry, if I don't see Tom and Alan, give them my best regards."

"Sure, Tino." Both knew that the "if" was a polite fiction: Tino would not see that detail of warders again.

"Nice chaps."

"They are, at that."

"Not so bad yourself, you know," Tino chuckled.

"Me? First-class b——" Harry expostulated loudly.

"No. You're kidding. You're all right." Tino grinned slyly at Leonard. "And Leonard's all right—if he'd only relax."

Leonard looked at him coolly. "Thanks."

"Leonard's got a chip on his shoulder," said Harry. He smiled sourly, looking at Leonard with unfriendly eyes.

"I've got my job to do."

"So've all of us. But there's ways and ways of doing it."

"How many cigarettes left?" asked Tino. He was allowed ten a day. He could, had he wished, have made a special request to the Governor for an increased allotment—and an increase in his beer—but he had not done so.

Harry answered him, "Three. But don't let it worry you."

"Give me one now, please. Now then, Harry, you drink the beer."

"Not allowed."

"Shame to waste it."

"Pop it down yourself."

"No, Harry. You, Leonard?"

"Rules," said Leonard curtly. But this time—and it was something he had never done before—he leaned over, struck a match and lighted Tino's cigarette for him. Tino, faintly surprised by the gesture, nodded to him. Then he reclined on the bed. He was at peace again. The routine had absorbed him once more. It was good: it spread a blanket over you, muffling you from unnecessary thought. It was a routine calculated to remove from you the effort of existence—it began early, soon after dawn, when the first faint noises of the prison stole in. There was the sound of heavy feet on the stones of the corridor as the prisoners marched into the yard, and it was soon after this that Tino rose. His breakfast was brought in, always cut up for him, there was his first cigarette—gratefully accepted—then he went into the toilet with one of the warders, washed, sat down and was shaved by the same warder. He dressed. When the other prisoners had been dispersed to work and the yard was empty, he was taken out for his first exercise period. So the morning drifted imperceptibly away. He had his lunch and with it his first tankard of beer. The detail of warders was changed. Tino chuckled with them, the new

guards sat down, examined the log-book and, with Tino, watched the afternoon depart. It was usually before tea that the Governor arrived. Then, Tino stood and answered his polite inquiries. Later, the doctor. Supper: then bed. The light was always on and when, sometimes, in the night, Tino found it hard to sleep and glanced surreptitiously at the warders, he found them sitting in their chairs, blankly and mechanically inert in the silence: a silence broken only by the faint pad outside of the Officer of the Watch and the intermittent inquiring scrape of the grille in the door.

Come to think of it, wasn't it best? It placed no burden upon a man to live like this.

When he had finished his cigarette, Tino said, "I'd like to write a letter, please."

Harry went over to the shelves and gave Tino a pad of paper and some envelopes. Tino hunched up on his bed, resting the pad on his knees, and began to write. He knew what he had to say, and so he wrote swiftly, breaking the fluency of it only to tear off another sheet from the pad. When he had finished, he read it through—glanced quickly at the warders and kissed the letter—then slipped it into an envelope and addressed it. He left it unsealed.

"For my wife," he said, giving it to Harry.

Harry nodded.

"Don't post it till to-morrow. Please?"

"Just as you wish. I'll tell the Governor."

Tino thought for a few moments with his head on a side. Then, with an odd shy smile, he said, "Harry, what do you think, I'd like to write a letter to my kid."

Harry looked surprised.

"Eh? The nipper's only a couple of months old."

"For when he grows up. When he is a fine tall boy, I just like him to read something his father had to say."

Leonard's eyes flickered to Tino over his book; they held him narrowly, the slaty grey of them grim and calculating, yet faintly startled.

"O.K. You write it," said Harry. He looked awkwardly at Leonard.

"The Governor'll let it go?"

"Why not? So long as he sees it first."

"No harm. Fine. Only I don't know what to write."

Then Tino sat back. He played with the pencil, staring at the wall, then, with a confident nod, began to write. The two warders sat silently, less preoccupied than before. Leonard no longer made a pretence of absorption in his book. The cards lay in a heap by Harry's hands. They listened intently to the sibilant scrawl of the pencil. When Tino had finished he read it, smiling fondly; then a halting uneasiness came into his face. He looked curiously at Harry and Leonard as if seeking advice: the rush of words on to the paper had been assured, now there was a glint of sadness in his eyes as he read them through. He said to Harry, shaking his head, "I don't know. I don't know."

Harry said, "Want me to see?"

"Yes. Please."

"Give."

Harry took the letter. He read:

My dear son. When you read this you will have grown beyond the age of childhood. It may be that you will find it difficult to think back to a father you never knew. Do not let it sadden you. I write this only to tell you with what pride I watch you commence your life. You are now ten weeks old. I am twenty-six. For reasons which are hard to understand I must go away, and it may be that on this earth we shall never meet again. How sorry I am that I cannot be by your side, to watch you grow, to help you and guide you, I cannot express. But since it is not to be, I wish to say this. I leave you my great love and the deepest prayers of my heart that you will find in your life happiness beyond measure. I see you, tall and strong, growing to a beautiful manhood, with a fine noble heart. I am very joyful. I should like you only to know that at this moment I love you deeply and I say, be good and true to your mother, respect yourself and believe in God. That is all. So, my dear son, from out of the years my hand steals out to yours and for a moment I feel it warm and close in mine. It is enough. I bless you. Your father, Tino Orsini.

Harry did not stir; he read it through again, stole a look at Tino and shrugged. He passed the letter to Leonard. Leonard read it, then put it down: he met Tino's eyes.

"No," said Tino wretchedly. "It will hurt. So many years. A shadow speaks. Better not."

"You know best," said Leonard. "I wouldn't." He pushed back the letter and, slowly, Tino tore it into shreds. Harry looked distressed. Tino stirred, sighed, settled down to the pad once more and wrote. He addressed an envelope, passing it to Harry.

"For my parents, this."

Then he smiled. "No more! Everything said!" He lay down. Then he rolled over on his side towards the two warders, reached out his hand to Harry and said, "If I fall asleep. Good-bye."

Harry shook his hand. "Cheero, Tino."

Tino stretched out to Leonard. "All right with you, Leonard?"

"Good luck."

"I'm tired. Got a long day to-morrow. Better get some rest."

He closed his eyes and with this thought fell asleep: for most men, death was swift and merciful: he had not been so lucky, they had given him the long death: he had suffered the pangs of it for three weeks now. But almost all of it lay behind. To-morrow would not be so very much.

He woke with a start, feeling that he had slept heavily. He was cold. Someone's hand was on his arm. Then he remembered with a contraction of his heart. The consequent tremor died almost at once. He got up. The new warders nodded, one accompanied him to the toilet where he washed. All of a sudden, Tino could recognise a new tempo in this grey dawn: something brusque and urgent. He felt it taking hold of him forcefully and hurrying him along. This morning, he was not shaved. His breakfast came but he shook his head, taking only a gulp of the scalding hot tea. Then this, too, he pushed away. It had an odd musty taste. He stole a look at the warders to see if, from their expressions, he could gather

whether they had put something in it: a sedative perhaps: he was sure they had. One of the warders motioned to him brusquely to drink up; the man's covert intensity told Tino all he wanted to know. He said reluctantly, "No. Please, no." The Governor came in. Tino stood, but the Governor beckoned to him to sit and asked him if there was any particular request he wished to make. He was a dry man, sparsely-built, as precisely dressed as if early dawn were the normal time at which you would find him about. He had the brown desiccated features of an ex-colonial officer; he had a long history of minor Indian regimental commands. His impassive brusqueness was neither kind nor caustic, he had an unenviable duty to perform and he would do it as meticulously as he knew how. But the inclination of his questions made Tino wryly smile. He was asking whether he wished to make a confession of guilt while there was still time. Tino shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing." He had been considerately treated, he said. He stood there with his head down: waiting: no more. Seeing it, the Governor did not prolong the strain. Tino's face, composed, was very white. The Governor left abruptly. Now everything leapt forward with a gathering momentum. The doctor came in as if he had been waiting outside and examined Tino perfunctorily. He nodded and went. One of the warders was slightly breathless. He ceased fidgeting only when the other warder, an older man, stared starkly at him. The cell was not quiet. The faint sounds of activity in the precincts beyond the corridor stole in, the signs of rising life in the prison, distant heavy footsteps. From far off, as if from a world divorced from his, Tino thought he heard the clanging bell of a tram. They did not wait long, though to all of them the interval seemed intolerably drawn-out. Then the door opened. A priest came in, a young man, with dark intense features. He wore his vestments and carried a tray, covered with a fine cambric napkin, on which stood a candle, a crucifix and the vessels of the rites. He stood in the doorway, looking uneasily round, avoiding instinctively for a moment the sight of Tino's face. The priest murmured, "Pax huic . . ." Then he stared at Tino. His mouth fell open a little; his face worked

slightly as if he had been both shocked and moved by Tino's youth and composure. Tino said mildly, "Come in, Father." The priest did not take his eyes off him. They regarded each other intently. Then a compassionate wrench took the young priest's face and he broke helplessly into Italian, "Figlio' mio . . ."

Behind, as quietly as he could, one of the warders closed the door of the cell.

THE PRIEST

I

He was perhaps twenty-eight. His name was Francis La Guardia. He had been born on the Bronx side of New York, in a teeming tenement building, and he had been ordained about twelve months. The district in which he had been raised was a swarming melting-pot of Italians, Irish, Jews and Negroes—his own parents had come from Sicily—and his early days made up a memory of stifling streets, gang fights and aggressive kids. His mother, who still called him Francisco, said she couldn't remember how many times she'd had to drag him out of a frenzy of battling young hoodlums with swollen lips. Indeed, looking at her fine priestly son, she blushed to think how many times she'd taken him out on the fire escape and belted him. But it was a competitive world, even for the young, and now that he was full-grown he still had the hard chunky fists and watchful eyes that his childhood had evolved. "Pretty tough going," chuckled Francis. "I don't know that I'd have changed it. Did me a power of good." But his expression was peculiarly gentle; he had the liquid good looks of his blood, somewhat swarthy, though he was apt, in moments of intensity, to surprise people by his nervous force. He was tall, with strong bulky shoulders. His work on charitable commissions took him around a great deal and many aged priests, grown shrivelled in service, felt themselves secretly at a disadvantage when confronted by this tall and assertively vehement young man. But they had to confess that his smile drew them out. It was soft and quizzical. He had, in fact, charm; it was an asset he wasn't unaware of—and if it could get another ten thousand dollars out of a rich Catholic industrialist for one of his charities he used it ruthlessly. He believed passionately in God. He had an ease of manner with

his fellow men, and everybody he knew—from the tenements of the Bronx to the mansions of Park Avenue—liked and trusted him. A lot of people prophesied for him in the distant future a Cardinal's hat.

His father—a driver on the subway—who adored him, always said, "He has a vocation. If he was not meant to be a priest, he could have been anything. A Congressman, maybe! President of the United States!" His mother, a craggy Sicilian, had the last word. Smugly, she added:

"Like mother, like son."

Most of Francis' schooling had been in the seminary; and it was there that he showed himself to be an excellent organiser. The seminary reported that he had a head on his shoulders as well as a heart of gold. It was a combination not granted to many men of God. As a result, it wasn't long before he found himself on a number of charitable boards. One of these committees dealt with Catholic refugees on the continent; and it was this committee that decided that, as its New York representative, he should be sent to an international church conference that was to meet in London. His superiors were shrewd bankers and industrialists who (for all that they were devoted to the church) knew that if there was one thing better than a dime, it was a dime that had a partner to clink against; and they took a fancy to this vigorous young man who had a directness of purpose that some of them felt was wasted on his cloth. ("Now there's the makings of a darn good insurance president. Goddam it, the guy can't be turning over fifty bucks a week as a priest!") They told themselves that they couldn't have put their finger on a better man to see that their funds were properly spent. They had the right idea. Francis had toiled pretty hard for a lot of the money himself, it had come straight out of the pockets of poor people like his own father and mother, dockers and policemen, sempstresses and truck-drivers: the New York sweat belt: and he meant to see that every possible cent went to the charitable purpose for which it had been meant. It was with this same sense of economy that he crossed the Atlantic second-class on a slow steamer, refusing the first-class berth his own committee had fixed. Of course,

the Bishop looked a trifle askance at this—he was secretly frightened of Francis, he would never have allowed him for a second near his own expense sheet—and he objected ruefully, "You'll have some authority, Francis, some standing to observe . . ."

Francis only chuckled. He patted his breast pocket, in which was a hefty cheque on the committee's London account. The Bishop could have sworn he winked.

"I've got it. Here!"

He sailed the following day.

Since then he'd had a month's hard work in London; and some of the continental diocesan representatives, most of them old priests, had found his scrutiny of their accounts a bit disconcerting at first. To a lot of them, efficiency and thoroughness of accounting didn't quite harmonise with the charity and benevolence of the church. But Francis pointed out that for every penny wasted, that much want crept into the life of some refugee. And he didn't think a well drawn-up balance-sheet was an affront to God. How could you answer that? Thereafter, they got through the business with a real good will. Francis was satisfied. He was even able to take a little breath and begin to look around. He had made many good friends.

That had started it. One of these new friends was a priest named Father Chandler. He was an old man with a parish in central London. Francis' hotel lay in this district, and when the aged priest asked him to dine with him they took to each other at once. Father Chandler had a worn face, like that seen sometimes on a fine antique coin, and a mop of thin silvery hair. He was very tranquil and at times gave one the impression that his pale blue eyes dwelt in a different world. Francis, who was fascinated by him, had a word for him: he was "civilised". The comparison between the two was really striking: the old man, untroubled, radiating his detached air of peace, and the energetic young Italian-American, a shade coltish and highly-strung, with his over-abundant nervous force. But they got along fine. It amused Father Chandler secretly—and shocked him, too—to hear something of life in the teeming Bronx; and he admired the young man who, he

felt, was one of those vital direct personalities who some day would have a valuable contribution to make to the church. He grew fond of Francis; he was lonely and he pressed Francis to dine with him again and again. They had at least one thing in common. Part of Soho was in Father Chandler's parish and many of his communicants were of Italian blood. Once or twice, Francis went round with Father Chandler and laughed to see how little difference there was between the Italians of Soho and those of the same race who lived in the east side of New York. He could almost imagine himself at home: he saw the same dark mobile faces, heard the same liquid chatter, smelled the same pungent odours that came out of the delicatessens and wine-shops of Frith Street. He grinned fondly, "Might be in Queens. Brooklyn! Same people. No difference at all!"

Father Chandler smiled. "And are all men so very different, my son?"

Francis gave him a sly look. He wasn't going to argue. It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he had met a street-scavenger who was a saint, a man who hoarded his nickels so that he could distribute candy bars to the kids pouring out of school; and he could also have shown you a little bar-hopper behind Times Square, a tiny flat-eyed man who looked like a tailor but had been a gambler and gunman in the old prohibition days, hiring himself and his gun out to shoot down men in cold blood with the same calculated care with which a stockbroker executes a client's commission—some people said that the frightening little creature had murdered more men than he could count. Francis let it go with an inward chuckle: to the pure, all things were pure.

Now Francis had had in mind a little excursion to a medieval church he wanted to see in Kent. He was really looking forward to it. He had half-persuaded Father Chandler to go with him—the ancient edifices of the faith fascinated Francis, to whom, in New York, a church that had been built before the turn of the century was rare. He meant to hire a car, take a lunch-basket maybe, and make a day of it. They wouldn't have many more opportunities to be together. He expected to

be going home in something like a week. But when he saw Father Chandler the evening before, the old priest shook his head. He looked depressed—and to Francis, rather ill.

"I'm sorry, Francis."

"What's wrong?"

"I've a sad duty in the morning. An execution to attend."

It was the last thing Francis had expected. It took his breath away slightly. He could only stare.

"A young man of your own race," said Father Chandler. "An Italian."

"Where?"

Father Chandler named the prison. It was in London.

Francis thought. He had a strange sensation. Then, impulsively, he asked:

"Couldn't I go with you?"

"You?"

Francis said compassionately, "It might make his last moments easier—to have someone near him who speaks his own language."

"I'd rather not, Francis."

"Why?"

"You're very young. It can be a harrowing experience."

"I'd be a poor sort of priest if I let that put me off."

And the longer Father Chandler argued, the more determined Francis grew. He didn't ask who the condemned man was—he didn't even want to know anything of his revolting crime. Whoever the unknown was, he felt a twinge of pity for him; Francis could guess how solitary and friendless the man would feel when the last terrible moments approached. It might be of some comfort to him to hear, at least, a friendly whisper in his own tongue. At length, Father Chandler sighed and gave way. Then, once more, curiously, something frail in the old man's appearance suggested that he was in pain. Francis shot a keen look at him.

"You're not looking awfully well."

"Just a little tired. I'd like to go to bed."

In the morning, early, Father Chandler's car picked up

Francis at his hotel. Francis, who was ready, came down and sat with the priest behind. On the seat next to the chauffeur lay a black case that contained the vessels needed to administer the sacrament. Father Chandler smiled faintly.

"You feel in the same mind, Francis?"

Francis gave him a sidelong glance.

"You don't know me, Father."

"On the contrary, I think I do."

They did not speak again as the car sped through the darkling empty streets. It was not yet dawn and the wintry morning was raw. There was a touch of snow in the air; the sky, in which a sickly tinge of yellow-red was appearing, suited grimly the sombre event. At length, they passed the high walls of the prison and the car drew up by a little door, some distance from the main gates. Dark and cold as it was, a little crowd had collected outside. A man, a gaunt creature with wind-blown hair and a red cold-pinched nose, had a shabby banner hung on a pole; it bore a gospel text. He was speaking aimlessly, more to himself than to the onlookers; the whistling wind took his words and scattered them. When Francis made to move, he saw that Father Chandler was sitting rigidly, contracted with pain. His face was grey: a bluish tinge about his nostrils. He pressed his chest. He whispered. Francis, alarmed, caught his words: he fumbled in the old priest's pocket, found a box of capsules and, recognising them, broke one hastily and held it under Father Chandler's nose. The chauffeur leaned back anxiously.

"Catches him that way. Knew he was in for one the minute we left."

"Is this all we can do?"

The man shrugged. "All I know of. Those things usually work." They watched Father Chandler's shrunken chest-gripped posture. Then the chauffeur made a move. "S'pose I'd better go to the lodge and get some help?"

"Quickly."

But Father Chandler put out his arm and motioned the chauffeur back. They heard him:

"I'll be all right now."

"Let's get you inside."

"No. I'm accustomed to it. I had just better not move for a while." They sat in silence, Francis stirring uneasily; he felt so helpless, not knowing what to do. The chauffeur watched both blankly. Then Father Chandler smiled wretchedly. "It's an old familiar of mine." He was breathing a little easier now, though his thin body was still arched oddly as though fearful of a recrudescence of the pain. Francis ached for him. He knew exactly what a copy of the dissolution of death the heart-stopping pangs of angina could be. At length, Father Chandler's eyes looked into Francis' unhappily. "Francis."

Francis took the black box.

"I understand."

"It's getting late. They won't delay."

"I'll be all right."

"I am so very sorry."

"Now, Father. Isn't it obvious that I was meant to go?" He got out of the car and pressed the old man's fluttering hand. "Stay where you are. I'll send someone out."

Francis went to the door and knocked on it: and when it was opened by a warder, hurried in, spoke to the officer on duty in the lodge and asked him to send a doctor out. He only waited while the telephone message was made. He saw the officer give him an urgent look and glance anxiously at his watch. Then Francis picked up his box and followed another warder into the prison building. Through a barred window, he caught a glimpse of a big yard; it was desolate. He was shown into a bleak room in which he robed. He prepared the vessels. Then an officer came for him, and conducted him down a long stone-flagged corridor. Hitherto, Francis' mind had been filled with worry for Father Chandler, the overwhelming rush of events; now, walking behind the warder, down that cold corridor, he was aware of the first sudden tremor: the tray in his hands shook. He steeled himself, whispering a prayer. But there was an unearthly glitter about the dazzling uncovered lights tha stretched ahead, as in a subway, and a silence around him that he could not describe. Even the warder seemed to walk with muffled step. Then they came to a door with a grille in it. He

heard a murmur of voices inside, then a plump, brusque-faced man with a bag came out: the doctor, Francis guessed. He gave both of them a flat indifferent glance and hurried by. The warder motioned to the door. Francis nodded. His mouth was dry. He took a step over the threshold. The room was hot and brightly lit. He was conscious at first only of the glare of light, the steamy cream walls, a bed and some scrubbed shelves. His wavering eyes, perhaps, sought to take in too much; they saw two doors, one tiny, through which he could see the shine of a wash-basin, the other closed, as blank as a wall. There were two warders within and both rose as he entered. Then, with an effort, Francis focused his eyes on a young man who stood there, collarless, waiting with a strained quizzical smile. Francis hardly knew what he had expected, but it shocked him inordinately: he was whispering, "Pax huic . . ." but something was stirring in his chest, a hot ball, resentful: appalled. It was the merest boy. His eyes shone. He seemed intensely still and only said, "Come in, Father," as Francis stood. Francis did not know what he muttered, it was in Italian: something spontaneous: and thinking about it later, he never really remembered what it was he said. His memory only began when one of the warders closed the door behind him with a discreet clang: when he put down the tray and genuflected: and he and the boy were together and alone with God.

Far off, as through cotton-wool, there was a sound of traffic: the petulant hoot of a motor; the hammer of a tram bell; a whine of engines, picking up speed. Life, always so impatient, was in a hurry. It only wanted to be pushing and thrusting on.

When it was all over, Francis was taken to the Governor's office. It was obvious to anyone that he was extremely unwell. The Governor was still absent and Francis was shown in by a considerate warder who brought forward a chair. The man said kindly, "Governor'll be back in a while. Anything I can do, just let me know." Francis seemed not to have heard him; he gave no sign. Another warder, employed on secretarial duties in the outer office, saw the unhealthy pallor of his face and its mottled look and, stopping typing, brought in a glass of

water. Francis drank it with a whisper of thanks. A little muscle, like a tic, was throbbing in his cheek. The warder eyed him curiously. The atmosphere in the entire prison was always sultry and nervy on the day an execution took place. "Taken it hard," thought the warder. He went back to his work muttering, "Young for the job, too. Well, rather him than me."

He didn't need to ponder over what went on in the executioner's shed.

The Governor's office was well, if austerely, furnished. The carpet was plain but thick; the walls were half-panelled in some dark heavily-grained wood. The desk, an old-fashioned mahogany one, with a leather surface, had capacious drawers with gleaming brass handles. Everything on it was laid out with military precision; a row of framed photographs, cool-looking gentlemen: past governors perhaps. There was a street map of the city and a big multi-coloured plan of the prison. It was the room of a man who cared little for show but had a strong sense of the dignity of his post and liked to have everything he needed near at hand. The window, flung wide on to the frigid wintry air, was barred. A big radiator hummed. It blanketed the room with its stale metallic heat; the shiver of air from the open window barely penetrated the benevolent sour-tasting fug.

Now Francis wiped his hands. What he had been through was something that had shaken him violently; it had left a stir in his stomach he could barely control. He could not tear the jerky little pictures from his brain. They went flickering in and out of his distracted mind like an old worn film; disjointed scraps, a sound here, a brief re-lived vision there—a shocking thump, the muffled breathing of a warder, the young man's dry mouth; his strained unhealthily shining face. He had sat with dying men before—he was a priest, it was his natural lot—he had seen squalor and despair, misery and pain incalculable: men exalted by the nearness of death and men trembling fearfully on the edge: but what had just ravaged him was the smooth coolly-calculated weight of the machinery that had sent the young man straight into the darkness: shot him into it

like an arrow. It was the most inhuman thing he had ever seen. Nothing had gone wrong, everything had been efficient and worked correctly, as if the machinery had been considerately greased and tested; it had been mercifully brief. But it had been so—irrevocable. Nothing human could have halted it. And nothing now could bring the young man back. At the back of Francis' mind trembled an uneasy shadow. He had a spate of questions on his lips and he did not know how to word them; the Governor's dry impassive face, what he had seen of it fleetingly, put him off.

There was a step. Francis rose. The Governor came in.

"Please don't get up, Padre."

"I don't want to take up your time . . ."

"Not at all. Feeling better?"

"Yes."

"A winter's morning isn't exactly the best time for occasions like this." The Governor looked at Francis as if debating whether to offer him something; a little brandy, perhaps. Then he shrugged. He faced the window, his back squarely on Francis, looking at the swirl of snow-flakes drifting in a ghostly silence out of a massy black sky. It was still not quite light. The Governor wore a dark grey suit, and his hair, cut short and grizzled, was brushed into a tight military sheen. He would dress as punctiliously for an execution, thought Francis, as he would for dinner with a judge. But his eyes, aloof and dispassionate, had a sardonic gleam. He was no fool. There was little colour in his flat cheeks, browned as if by a tropical sun, and his hands were excellently kept. Not a man to invite confidences—no, but a man you could depend on in a job like this. He kept his back turned to Francis as if in thought for quite a while. Francis half felt it to be a polite dismissal. But he would not move. The Governor turned. He asked indifferently, "Your first?"

"I'd never attended an execution."

"No. Quite. Not an enviable experience."

"And for you?"

"For me?" The Governor seemed surprised, impatient. "It's my duty."

"Not an enviable one, though, for you either."

"I was a soldier. I know what I have to do." Then the Governor sat. He looked at Francis out of eyes in which Francis could read a flicker of hardly-concealed contempt. Francis knew that his face was still very white: that his fingers were weaving restlessly: that his own eyes still had that haunted glint of shock. He looked down. The Governor's expression was so revealing. He was thinking, "Infamous! To send a stripling like this chap. You'd think they knew better, upon my word!"

Francis gave the first glimmer of a smile and explained, "Father Chandler was to attend. He was taken ill. He's still in the car outside."

"I see. In that case you'll want to be——?"

"There was something I wanted to ask you first."

"Ah." It was a frigid sort of sigh. It wasn't encouraging. The Governor's mouth tightened bleakly; it was neither a smile nor a grimace. He was the most inhuman man Francis had ever seen.

"It's important to me," Francis said.

"Quite so. You're not English?"

"American. American-Italian."

"I thought so. Over here long?"

"A month or so."

"Indeed. Pity we couldn't send you back with pleasanter memories. Well, if you can be brief . . ." The Governor made a tired gesture to his files. He had no more time to spare.

Francis said, "What did you think of him?"

"Who?"

"The boy who just died."

"The prisoner? He gave no trouble. They rarely do."

"You must have had some opinion of him."

"Must I?" Francis thought the Governor's eyes were mocking. "Why, may I ask?"

"He was more than a number on a cell. You're used to judging men. You were a soldier, you said."

The Governor spent some little time before answering. He

stroked his flat smoothly-shaven cheeks. "I thought he was quiet and self-contained. A good-looking boy. I thought he'd be difficult. An Italian: you know? Forgive me. They're sometimes apt to be a bit volcanic, if that's the word. Well, he wasn't. He was very good. The warders' reports were excellent. He ate. He slept. He was very polite. But it isn't uncommon. They become resigned. They get to accepting the inevitable and not many of them wear their nerves to shreds, fighting against something they can't avert. It's human nature. And a very good thing, too. It's a longer form of death than most of us'd care for, but it has to be faced. Does that answer you?"

"Partly."

"I'm sorry I can't tell you more."

Then Francis asked something that surprised the Governor:

"Did you like him?"

The Governor's eyebrows rose. "Really. I don't get to terms of intimacy with the inmates."

"But did you?"

"He was a prisoner."

"And a man."

Now the Governor gave a frosty chuckle. He looked at Francis out of narrowed, but not ill-humoured, eyes. And he fell silent, fingering the pens idly in his tray. He knew where this was leading, and he sighed. This young priest, a bit of a foreigner—American? no, an Italian! you didn't change your blood by crossing an ocean—with his shrewd aquiline features and quiet domineering tenacity, had really touched on something. For the Governor never quite knew whether he looked upon his prisoners with the cool disciplined paternalism of the regimental commander, whose men turned to him for guidance —a father-substitute—or whether they were, to him, offenders who had put themselves beyond the pale of human society and needed someone who stood for the glacial authority of the law. It was a point: a good one. It made the Governor wryly grin. He had never really resolved it and, knowing his own nature, he did not think he ever would. And perhaps it was just as well! If he got to philosophising about it, prison routine could quite

easily go to bits. Give those hardened creatures an inch and they'd grab a yard. Convicted thieves, murderers, rapers, swindlers—by God, you needed more than a handbook of Freud's to deal with them! What a crowd. Not the sort he'd had to deal with in the past: he'd had all kinds in his regiment, wild ones and tough ones, but they'd shaped up well—they had to when the army got hold of them—and in the end they'd got the regimental pride soaked right into their bones. But these dregs . . .? Sometimes, from the merest thought of contact with them, he shrank. He was a gentleman. There'd been four generations of army men in his family. This was the last kind of job he'd ever expected to touch.

When the dominion of India had been born and they'd started disbanding regiments with a battle-history as long as your arm, he'd half expected to be docked. He had no illusions about the gratitude of governments. He wasn't far off retiring age, and Indian colonels weren't always at ease in home commands. There was apt to be a certain frostiness towards them—old moss-backs, they sometimes called them at the clubs. Not that he'd expected a cavalry regiment or one of the plums like that! No. But he'd served the army well, like his forefathers before him. His name was good. The India Office knew it. And the new Hindustani officials—even though sometimes they found him a trifle remote and were a little afraid of him—respected him. So at the clubs everybody said, Colonel White's going to be all right. A sahib. They simply couldn't drop good seasoned commanders like that! The Governor's face twisted in a sardonic smile. Couldn't drop him? They could. And did. They'd left him high and dry for a bit when the regiment was dispersed, then they'd offered him an Inspectorship of sorts in the new dominion army. It went against his grain. The pay had been good, his pension secure—but, confound it, he just couldn't find it in him to take orders from Indians. He'd commanded them; now it would have been his turn to "sir" and truckle to them. The old man, mercifully dead considering our scuttle out of India—ex-Ghurkas, he'd been—and his grand-dad (a Pathan man) would have squirmed in their graves. He'd given the offer a little thought, then

firmly but respectfully turned it down. The Secretary at Bombay, sitting back in that rattan-windowed office, under a swirling fan, had looked at him with a compassionate glint in his eye.

"It's all we can offer you, Colonel."

"I've thought about it. You understand my feelings?"

"Quite. Now what do you propose to do?"

"You're not suggesting that the army's finished with me?"

The Secretary looked blandly down his nose.

"Not at all. But you understand there'll be a good number of long-service officers who've become redundant. It's up to the War Office now."

"You think there's a chance of a decent home command?"

"Decent?" The Secretary looked mildly surprised. (That was the moment the Colonel had known he'd be a lucky man if he got any sort of command at all.) "I can't say. The home establishment's tumbling down. Economy, you know. And as I said, you're not the only one—not by a long chalk."

So the Colonel took himself off with an angry pit in his chest and waited for the worst. He'd travelled home. He wasn't married. Say what you like, the Indian climate wasn't fair to a woman, nor to her kids; and so he put up at one of the smaller clubs, found London cold and dismal, and spent his evenings with a crowd of simmering officers who were all in the self-same boat. Scores of them! He knew that, having no wires to pull, he didn't stand a nigger's chance! Half-pay, at the-best. And after a lifetime's service—it made a man see red!

Then, when his nerves had become a little frayed with waiting, they'd come along begrudgingly with this offer from the Home Office. The governorship of a London prison. It had revolted him! His first instinct had been to tear up the letter and see them damned. He had talked it over at the club, then he had seen in the eyes of some of his old friends, discarded like him, a certain thoughtfulness: a kind of envy. They wouldn't have been so particular, their faces said. Well, that surprised him. Quite pulled him up! He liked the appointment no more because of it, but it gave him to think. If he refused it, they'd class him as "difficult" and his career would go into a War

Office pigeon-hole, to be tacitly forgotten until, perhaps, another war broke out. (He wasn't sure he wouldn't have looked forward to it, bitterly. By heavens, they knew the value of men who put country before self then!) And the alternative distressed him. Unmarried, he could see the future clearly and it wasn't an attractive sight. A cottage in the country, a daily char—he had little but his pay—with nothing to do with his days but potter about with a shot-gun and a dog, digging up a ten-by-four vegetable plot. A cheese-paring, diminished existence, a veritable death for an active man like him! He fretted away. But he knew that there was no longer any doubt about his taking the job.

He'd grabbed it. And the remarkable thing was, he'd never regretted it. It surprised him. His prejudices died the moment he found his feet; it was an honourable service and a responsible post. It was astonishing, but it called forth the very best of his abilities. It needed a cool clear head, a sense of discretion and firmness: the gift to know when to be adamant and when to be tolerant. His subordinates, the prison staff, were first-class men, not unlike the non-coms of the old army days: the prisoners knew him better than to try their tricks on him—he saw through 'em right away—and he had the idea that they liked and respected him. He got to know them individually and a lot of the old lags, absolute characters so many of them, really tickled him. Incredible—but between him and some of the less vicious of them quite an affinity grew up. The men knew the difference between a devil of a prison "boss" and a governor who could be hard, but could be trusted to give them a square deal. The rations improved—the last governor had been a rough doddering old fool. He tried a few experiments in communal gathering. Nothing adventurous, but enough to make them realise that they were in his mind. And when he did his rounds and saw some old scallywag, who'd come back for another stretch, knuckle his thumb to him brightly with the suggestion of a sly wink—by God! he had the devil's own job to stop a chuckle popping into his eyes. They called him "the Colonel". They said he was "all right". In his own dry way, he took the liberty of thinking he was.

Naturally, some of the men he really disliked. He found it hard to be tolerant with arrant swindlers; and he found a shrinking inability to feel humane toward some of the specimens who had been sent up for crimes of sickening sexual violence. He could sum up a man by looking into his face. Some of the faces he saw here were terrifying. They shattered his pride in the inherent decency and dignity of the human race. Mean, beastly, depraved—they'd do their time, break out into some horror again and come back for another stretch. But with the habitual burglars, the slap-happy larcenists, he knew just where he was. Most of them had been shaped by bad environment; they had no trade, when they got out into civilian life they felt uneasy and naked; they didn't know what to put their hands to—it was only natural that they should try another "safe job" and find themselves back behind bars. He had a working understanding with lags like these. But some of the evil misfits . . . God! You needed a strong stomach for that type. He hadn't time for an affinity with them!

The only other prisoners from whom, psychologically, he kept his distance, were the condemned men. He'd had five through his hands since he'd taken on the job. Only one had been reprieved. Four had lived out their few days, mute and shrunken, in the little cell in the secluded corner of the prison—the "knocking-off shop" the prisoners wryly called it—before the scaffold door in the cell was unlocked and they took the last short walk. He had measured it once: ten steps. Quick and merciful. And he had never known the operation to be bungled yet. But it was not physical revulsion that made him instinctively withdraw from them—(he made his routine visits, of course, rigorously, and every request they made got his most compassionate attention)—it was sheer womanish pity: and the fact that you just couldn't get to terms with a man who was as good as dead the moment he was put into that cell. It was like trying to measure up to a ghost. They knew it. They all had that greyish pallor; it was stamped on their faces, no matter how jaunty the show of bravado they made. And they all said much the same sort of thing. "I'm appealing, Guv'nor. I'll get off. Didn't give me a fair trial, you know."

"No, I didn't know. I'm so sorry to hear it."

"But my solicitor'll see to me. He's bright. I didn't have a chance. Judge as good as told the jury I ought to swing and they went and brought me in guilty like a lot of —— sheep!"

But all the time they knew: deep deep down. They were buoying themselves up because despair was too cruel to contemplate. You saw it in their eyes, for ever twitching and restless, looking into corners—meeting your glance with a pathetic hunger, an urgent appeal to be allowed to hang on to life. One man, who had murdered his wife and child—God alone knew why, a moment of jealous frenzy, another man, perhaps—had burst out at him, "They're not really going to do me in, Guv'nor? Hang me?"

"Well, you know, that's a bit off my beat. I'm only here to look after you."

The man had tried to laugh. "You can do that all right. Just take me out and lose me in the crowd. That's what I'd call bein' a proper pal."

The Governor had had to smile.

"I'm glad you're keeping your chin up, anyway."

"I'm not." And the fellow had looked really scared. "I've got the creepin' willies inside. Ask the warders. I don't sleep. I sweat blood. Christ, ten days and they'll take me out." He had got back to his point again: vehemently. "They can't do it. Who gave me my life? God, wasn't it? Well, only God can take it away. It's murder. Murder. It's all I've got, me life, they can't take it away!"

But they had. The Governor thought back dryly. One dark morning, very early, they had come for him, the mild elderly executioner who looked like an auctioneer's agent, an undertaker, perhaps, and they had, indeed, taken his life away. The man hadn't said a word or wept. It was all over before he so much as found his voice.

So the Governor tried to be kind to them. But they were figments; they no longer had human substance; they came and went quickly, slipping through his fingers, and the most he ever got to know of them was from reading the reports of the trial.

Now this young priest was asking questions about one of them. Tino Orsini. The Governor tapped the blotter with his pen. His eyes went oddly to the clock. It had been over ten minutes. By now, the lad should be somewhere in the shades, hovering in the limbo between heaven and hell. (Not that he believed that popular stuff—extinction, that was death! An instant after the trap fell, the thing that had been human went out like a light. A dark sleep. Oblivion. The candle was out.)

He answered after a pause, "You want to know what I thought of him? I was a little surprised when I first saw him. I'd expected different."

"Oh? Why?"

"They're apt to be of a type, the condemned men. They know they've had it, and they tend to brazen the whole thing out. Of course, they're scared. They shiver in their shoes. Who wouldn't? But they know what they've done, they've seen the whole majesty of the law point its finger at them, and in a funny way it shocks them. They feel they're only getting what they deserve. Take it from me, when I read the daily log-books and see how they tell the warders that the executioner's door won't be opened for *them*—that's when I know they're ready to pay the price. It's their funny whimpering way of cocking a snook at fate. Do you understand me, Padre?"

"Yes. And Tino Orsini?"

"Well, of course, he was rather young. I sometimes wondered if he realised just what he'd done. He never joked about his crime, never told the warders he'd see them underground—I felt he didn't care. Of course, different natures express their fears in different ways. He probably kept it all simmering inside his chest."

"But you liked him?"

"Did I say so?"

"You half suggested it."

The Governor smiled thinly. Then he said something distressing.

"You can't like a man who's got the—what do you church-

men call it?—the stigmata of death on his brow. It's a little horrifying, you know."

Francis felt shocked by the expression. The stigmata: the wounds of Christ. He shrank from the word. But he knitted his brows. "I felt an incredible sorrow for him. I can't tell you why. Something happened . . . something passed between us . . . something I can't explain to you: I'm a priest. Did you really believe he was capable of the crime they say he did?"

The Governor looked up sharply.

"Say? He did it!"

"Please answer me."

The Governor made an impatient breezy gesture. "My dear Padre, it's an emotional business seeing a man off, but you've got to keep some sort of clear mind. Why, my prison's half full of men you could have five minutes chat with and come away swearing they were as innocent as babes unborn."

The Governor's cynical face stopped Francis from going on: he could only say helplessly, "He was so young. It seemed such a waste."

"What about the girl he killed?"

"I don't know who he killed. I never knew a thing about the trial before I came."

"I thought not. So you're not being quite fair." The Governor put down his pen with an irate clatter. "It's all so dramatic, the hanging. Makes you forget about the victim. They're past history. You can't be bothered digging them up, putting a bit of glamour into them. Well, you take it from me, that girl he murdered had a life she wanted to live, too."

"Yes," sighed Francis. "That's so."

"I'm telling you it's so."

And the Governor's eyes went opaque. He was curiously annoyed. The false romanticism people put into convicted criminals—murderers, at that—really got under his skin. He'd seen a picture of the dead girl. She was young, even in that blurred newspaper photograph he'd recognised a real eagerness for life; bright roving eyes, warm rounded features, gay and spicy and full of zest. You could imagine her laughing; bursting out, a fine healthy ringing peal; the kind of girl you

liked to slip your arm round as she snuggled up. A circus performer, too. That was what had given the case its peculiar tang. An odd crowd, the whole lot of them—clowns, acrobats, animal-trainers and a ringmaster had come and gone in the box and it had been a real field-day for the newspapers. They had let themselves go with a couple of columns every day. It had such a bizarre sort of atmosphere, you didn't often get such a stream of fantastic witnesses as these—why, they'd even had a midget in the box, they'd had to stand the absurd creature on a stool to get his head above the ledge! And the prisoner in the dock—from the way he'd watched the proceedings, anyone would have thought he was a mildly interested onlooker rather than the chap who was being tried for his life. Yet, for all that, there'd been moments when a curious sense of sultriness gripped hold of the court and there was an uneasy feeling that behind the revelations lingered a stormy passion, unbetrayed by words: and then a film of sweat shone on the prisoner's face. (A gem of a case from the reporters' point of view! How they had piled it on!) But there was never any doubt about the result. It was a foregone conclusion from the start. The case had had some really shocking elements. They had put the jury's back up, horrified the few women who sat on it, and the prisoner hadn't gone out of his way to put them right.

You'd have thought he wanted it: the rope.

Now the Governor could remember when, two hours after the verdict, the lad had been delivered into his care. He was put into the condemned cell at once and, later in the evening, the Governor had paid his first visit to see how he'd settled down. He disliked the incursion of a "hanging" into the prison. It got around to the other men and there sprang up a taut nervousness; a silly kind of hysteria. It got worse as time went on: the day of the execution was quite a trial. Some of the men went sick. Some of the feeble ones cried. The Governor was always relieved when it was over. The prisoners got a mental picture of the condemned man, they had no chance of seeing him or knowing what he was like, yet it spread around: a sort of bush telepathy. It was something the Governor couldn't get to the bottom of, but they knew minutely how

young he was, how he behaved, the exact details of his crime and how he was going to meet the end. They talked about this chap, Orsini, a lot. A kid. They wanted him strongly to get a reprieve. And they were dismayed when they found out he'd refused to appeal. Why, it was fantastic! Good-looking youngster like that?—the beaks'd give him a "lifer" rather than see him swing on the end of a rope! By gum, the shocked whispering that had gone on. You'd have thought they were blood-relations of his, the way they fluttered about.

Yes, the Governor'd been a little surprised when he first set eyes on the lad. He stood up as the Governor entered, he was reading a book, smoking, and when the Governor beckoned him to sit he smiled faintly and shook his head—he gave you the feeling that he'd been well brought up and he didn't think it would have been quite polite. He was slim, but his body was well-knit and lithe, a circus performer's body. He moved with a particular grace. He was, as all the newspaper photographs had shown, exceptionally handsome—in a Mediterranean way, of course, regular features, a trifle immature but mobile, well and cleanly-cut: a real film star's face. No wonder the women'd flapped so much to read about him during the trial. His bearing was modest. He spoke softly with an accent, never raising his voice, and didn't seem distressed by his harsh surroundings. As a result, the Governor eyed him keenly. It was very normal, the first night in the cell, for such prisoners to be jumpy; sometimes they swaggered pathetically, laughing loudly, foolishly; sometimes they were depressed and just sat there, staring blankly at the wall, whispering that they wanted to be left alone. Nothing of that about Orsini: it was almost as though his spirit had soared out of the cell and the shell that was left in it could no longer be hurt. You couldn't grasp hold of the chap: elusive. But there was a sad kind of gleam in his eye, you couldn't say it was sardonic—it was rather a sort of far-off twinkle: upon his soul, it had left the astonished Governor with the sensation that they were all doing the chap an unusually good turn. So he had said to him, kindly, "Anything extra you want, just tell the warders and I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you."

"Cigarettes and so on. A little extra beer. Got all the books you want?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm sure I'll be comfortable."

(Comfortable? Again the Governor felt at a loss. It wasn't the word he'd have chosen for a predicament like this.)

Then Orsini said, "I like to play chess."

"That's all right. I'll see you get a board and a set of men."

"But these warders don't play. I suppose you couldn't come along yourself sometimes and have a game?"

The Governor had stared hard into the chap's face to see if it was a bit of a cheek: but it wasn't. It was the politest sort of request and the lad seemed to think that the Governor would really enjoy the game. "I'm afraid I'm much too busy for that," he'd replied.

"I'm so sorry."

"But you'll have half a dozen warders on your shifts. I'm sure one of them'll have an idea of the game. If not—well, you can always teach them, you know."

"That's an idea. I will!" And the chap's eyes had shone.

The Governor sat in his office after that and gave the lad a lot of thought. An odd 'un. He'd give no trouble. And it was because of this that the Governor read the warders' daily log-book with more than normal care. It was a duty he disliked: a macabre business, reading those dry prying records of the prisoner's life: like watching a man at his private business through a peep-hole. Written in bald, often ungrammatical language, they could nevertheless leave you with a sour thrill of horror. And distasteful as it was, it was necessary. For some of the prisoners, on whom time and fear hung heavy, couldn't resist talking; and they let out a little more than they knew. Their remarks, their boasts, their whines, were revealing. They were confessional, those records—pieced together, they told you a lot more than had come out in court.

But Orsini hadn't a thing to say about his case. He never uttered a word on the trial. He talked about his life in the circus—practically a trapezist's manual, great chunks of it!—why, there were times when you could almost visualize the

dazzling arcs, the lithe whirling bodies in spangled vests and tights, twisting and turning high up in the tent, the singing wires, the tense awe of the crowd. But they didn't give you the slightest clue as to what he was doing in that cell. And they gave you no hint of a brutal nature, of instability or sexual unbalance: indeed, they suggested only a modest nature, a keen sprightly eye and a chuckling sense of fun. The chap talked about the clowns, Beppo and Louie, and you saw the grotesque painted creatures rolling in the sand: or squabbling in the tent after the show, like over-grown kids. You went into the caravans. You saw rivalry and rough good-nature and the petty temperamental jealousies of people who lived incredible vagabondish lives, but lived them to the full. The Governor read them again and again. As good as a book! Fantastic creatures—right out of his world! But they told him nothing about the chap involved. Nothing. He was a shadow; the circus sprang to life, but he stood behind the curtain and you got only the merest glimpse of him. The queerest sort of chap!

And, of course, the warders liked him. He was good company, they said. One of them, Harry Mercer, remarked that there was no harm in him. The Governor'd looked at him sharply: he'd commented dryly that the man wasn't in the cell for the good of his health. Sentimental asses! thought the Governor. To judge a man by the cheerfulness of his conversation and the company he made.

Yet it was true. He *was* good company. Whenever the Governor visited him, the chap had something slyly disarming to say. He told the Governor he liked his self-contained flat, hot and cold laid on, but the view was a bit restricted; and privately he didn't care for the bars behind the window. He chuckled that he'd been fooled by the agent's adverts or he wouldn't have taken the place. The Governor, with his tongue in his cheek, retorted that he'd be lucky to get any sort of place at a rent as low as this. Orsini—the warders called him by his Christian name, Tino—smiled. It was a fact. Dirt-cheap! Then he invited the Governor to come in and have tea with him one day. Choose his own time—he'd pretty nearly always find him in! "But not too far ahead. Got an appointment with

a professional gentleman in a couple of weeks." He looked at the Governor demurely. "You know? Might put my time-table a little out of joint."

Cool! thought the Governor, going away. And he restrained a meagre smile. Impudent devil—he could see what Mercer meant, no harm in him.

Then he steeled himself. He was falling into the trap he'd warned the warder against; being taken in by a bright twinkling eye.

The lad read avidly. He ate with appetite. He had no complaints; he asked for no extra privileges, he lived his days lazily, and when the weather was fine, spent his exercise periods walking briskly around the yard. From his office window, sometimes, the Governor watched him. The chap was yearning to use his limbs, you saw it in the springy motion of his steps; and he talked nineteen to the dozen, the warders were always chuckling away.

"Charm," said the Governor oddly. "That's what he's got. Unconscious charm!"

He wrote two letters every day: one to his parents and one to his wife. Those to his parents were couched in intimate affectionate terms; you got a feeling of deep blood-bound devotion, they weren't the kind of letters an ordinary English chap'd write. They were full of soft endearments and were so obviously meant to keep their spirits up. The Governor had asked Tino—(it made the Governor's eyebrows go up at the way he, too, was using the lad's Christian name in his thoughts) —not to put in Italian expressions, which made the letters hard to check. But in their simple English, clumsily rendered at times, the letters gave a moving picture of a Latin family, passionately attached to each other, aghast and tremulous with horror at the catastrophe, but covering it up with a fierce voluble pride. Sometimes the mother wrote back: sometimes the father. They wrote from an address in Soho. They gave a lot of gossip about the shop, a wine business. And they were religious people, they bade their son pray regularly every day. But in Tino's letters to his wife the Governor thought he detected a different note. They were affectionate, yet strangely

remote. They didn't spring to life as did those to his own flesh and blood. Tino was obviously devoted to her, but his words were gentle and calm: they gave no hint of passion. He might have been writing to a sister he tenderly loved. He grew fervent in his letters only when writing about his child. He was mad for news about the kid. The yearning, then, literally leapt out of them. The wife, Judith was her name, wrote back every day; touching letters, too. They throbbed with love. She seemed a decent sort—quite English, from her phraseology. When she sent a photograph of herself and the kid, the Governor couldn't help studying it curiously. She was English all right, fair and beautiful, with a wide brow and steady eyes: you'd see such faces in the West Country any day. The kid was just a fat well-bundled tot. The Governor put the picture back into the envelope with a lingering sigh. No joke for that little family! The horror would cling to the pair, to the wife, to the kid as he grew up, as long as they lived.

Now the Governor found that he'd been speaking all the time. The priest was leaning forward, listening with gleaming eyes. His own talkativeness surprised the Governor. He hadn't meant to chatter at length like this.

Then, with knitted brows, the priest asked, "But didn't he appeal?"

"He didn't want to."

"Why not?"

"I can't say. He had his own reasons. His legal adviser insisted, he said they mustn't lose hope, every chance was worth snatching, but he just shook his head. Frankly, as I told you, there were some rather unfortunate features about the case that ruled out any chance of a reprieve. He was dead, and he knew it. He wanted to get it over with."

Bewildered, Francis asked, "What were these unfortunate features?"

Again, the Governor's eyes looked at him mockingly.

"You say you never read anything about the case?"

"Nothing."

"Then I can only advise you to look them up for yourself."

For all that, the Governor had been surprised when he

heard that the prisoner had refused to appeal. Fruitless as he knew it would be, he thought even the faintest chance was worth seizing; no man parted with life as lightly as that. After the solicitor had been in to see him, the Governor felt deeply perturbed. He went along to see Tino.

"I've had your legal adviser in my office. He was quite upset."

"Oh? I'm sorry about that."

"He tells me you don't wish to lodge an appeal."

"No, Governor."

"Will you tell me why not?"

Tino looked around the cell. "I don't think it'd do any good."

"You know what the alternative is?"

"I know why I'm here. It isn't because your warders are lonely. And I haven't complained."

The Governor stared at him intently.

"I'm bound to say that I think your decision is unwise. After all, you're young."

Tino smiled vaguely. Now he seemed uneasy. He looked straight into the Governor's eyes. "That's why."

And he sat. He seemed to find it difficult to know how to speak. His smile had become strangely pained. A little sweat had sprung out on his brow. He began, "I've lived a life with lots of action. You understand?—always moving around, seeing different countries, different towns. Oh, it's been good to travel, to meet people, see friendly faces. And to fill your lungs with air, to sleep in a tent, a caravan, to see the sky full of stars and listen to the trees. You don't know what wonderful sounds there are in trees. And I've always used my body. It's been like a spring, full of life, doing what I tell it—how can I explain what it is to leap and do the things I was trained for? Sure of my body, my arms, my legs—believe me, it's wonderful to be young and strong and free! Suppose they say now, right, Tino, you don't die, twenty years in prison for you. Or maybe as long as you live." Tino was speaking hastily now, emotionally, stammering: there were tears in his eyes. "You think it is better that I should spend the rest of my years in a cell, like a

poor rat in a trap, feeling myself moulder away? Eating my heart out? Never to use my body's strength, to feel it exulting —how can I tell you in words? You must know it. And never to smell the country again, never to see my friends. You think that would be giving me life? No. A living death. Better the other way, a thousand times. I'm not afraid. I know it's quick."

There was a silence. Then the Governor said, as coolly as he could, "You have your wife and child to think of. Your family."

"Better for them too. As long as I'm alive, I'm a living wound. It will never heal. My wife will lie in bed at night and think of me in a stone cell, under bars, and she will die, every night, another death inside. My child will grow up with a father he has never seen, shut up somewhere in a far-off jail. My way, he will have no one to think of. He may never even know. It is not necessary to tell. The other children should not be given a chance to laugh and make bitter jokes at him. And my father and mother?—they would understand. You wouldn't. No. I don't wish to appeal."

The Governor got up.

"For all that, I think your solicitor should be advised to do so, whatever you say."

"Over my head?"

"He must do as he thinks best in your own interests. It won't help him, of course, to have you hindering him like this."

Tino said nothing more. He looked downcast. The Governor left.

Francis asked, "So no one appealed?"

"Oh, yes. They appealed."

"And it made no difference?"

"Not in the least. It was a forlorn hope, as I told you. It was dismissed."

When the result of the appeal had come through, it fell to the Governor to acquaint Tino with the news. He rose as the Governor entered and knew, perhaps, before the Governor spoke what it was he had to say.

"Orsini, I'm afraid I must tell you that the Home Secretary

sees no reason why he should modify the sentence of the court."

Tino smiled awkwardly. If he showed embarrassment, it was only because the Governor was ill at ease.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Governor, neither do I."

"I'm very sorry."

"They shouldn't have bothered you."

"It was my duty to inform you."

"Thank you, Governor. You're always very kind. Now when are we going to have that little game of chess?"

Francis sighed. He shook his head bewilderedly, a little like a dog coming out of water. "And that was that?"

"As you put it, that was that."

"I'm sure you regretted it."

"Naturally. A sense of humanity doesn't bar a man from holding a position like mine."

Francis stole a look at the Governor. Who would have thought that in those dry staccato remarks he had outlined the closing stages of an affecting tragedy? An unfeeling shell of a man: upright, considerate—but detached. Francis stirred. Nothing the Governor had told him had quite satisfied him, but there seemed to be nothing more to say. He was vaguely angry. So he rose. He said, "Thank you. I've taken up a lot of your time." And he picked up his box and made to go. Then the Governor's voice recalled him. He turned. The Governor was sitting back in his chair. He had put up his hands, tent-wise, and there was a quizzical glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Of course, when you came into this office you were quite sure there had been a shocking miscarriage of justice?"

"I wasn't sure."

"Then permit me to make up your mind for you." The Governor's voice rose with asperity. "Put it right out of your thoughts. It couldn't possibly have occurred! In this country, a man's tried by his peers, a jury of decent men. They don't bring in a hanging verdict unless they're positive he committed the crime—they hate it, it lies on their minds, even though they don't have the grisly job of passing sentence. And all the rules of evidence, the whole weight of the law's on the

prisoner's side. He gets more than a fair chance. The meshes of the net are very wide. If he was found guilty, it was because the evidence of murder was overwhelming and there wasn't the remotest shadow of a doubt that he did it. And he did. Believe me. We don't hang innocent men."

Francis remarked, brushing it wryly over his shoulder, "The boy had something to say about that."

"Oh? What, pray?"

"He said justice had ears, but no eyes—just like the blind man he saw that night."

"What blind man?"

"I presume one was mentioned . . .?"

The Governor looked at him blankly. He was growing curt. "There was no blind man."

"He seemed to connect it . . ."

"I read the verbatim reports of the trial. There was no blind man connected with the case." The Governor bent wearily over his papers. "Have I satisfied you?"

"Let's say, nobody could have done more."

"I'm relieved. I won't keep you. Good day to you, Padre."

And since the Governor made no effort to shake hands with him, Francis nodded and turned and went. The Governor, without stirring, watched him go. The familiar bleak pallid smile pursed his lips. So the priest thought him heartless? Well, let him. He couldn't know that the Governor's next few days would have a vicious edge to them—that his housekeeper and the whole prison staff would find him quite unfit to live with. The way these damned things haunted him. Distasteful! Which of his ex-Indian associates would have thought him so sensitive? And then he sighed and frowned. There were still some formalities to be seen to. He had to receive the Sheriff's warrant, the coroner's report and the burial certificate, and send the necessary papers to the Home Office. How he would be glad to see the last of them. That would close the business, at least! And then it would take him quite forty-eight hours to dispel the hysteria that overwhelmed the building and get the prisoners firmly back into their placid routine again.

II

When Francis left the prison, he was vaguely surprised to see that Father Chandler's car was still outside. It seemed an interminable time since he left it. A glance at his watch showed him that less than an hour had elapsed. But it had begun to snow. He had gone into the prison in the strained emptiness of a leaden grey daybreak: he came out into a world of flurrying flakes, whirling silently in the wind. The traffic flowed by on hushed wheels; the snow blanketed all sound. He put his box on the front seat by the chauffeur, casting a swift glance at Father Chandler sitting quietly in the back. But before climbing in beside him, with his hand on the door, something impelled him to turn and look back. The little crowd of people by the main entrance had gone, no more than a couple of passers-by were reading incuriously the notice that had since been pinned to the gate. The gospeller was just leaving, the pole and banner slung over his shoulder; he looked pinched, but elated; and he threw at Francis as he passed the derisive stare the itinerant amateur reserves for the professional. (The wind billowed at the banner. Francis caught a glimpse of the fiery red text: "Repent while ye are in the midst of your sins. Remember the pit". Then the man caught at the banner, rolled it, and, head thrust aggressively into the wind, went trudging on.) Francis climbed into the car.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Father Chandler smiled sweetly. "Much."

Francis stole a look at him. He doubted it. The old priest still had that hollow-chested posture of pain.

But he sat back, turning his head to the snow-flecked window so that Father Chandler should not see his face. He wished he could have been alone. He didn't want to talk; his thoughts were fluttering. So, for a while, neither stirred. Then the chauffeur glanced back inquiringly and briskly started the engine. Before he could move, Father Chandler's hand came out and rested cautioningly on his arm. Francis muttered, "There's nothing to keep us."

"Wait."

"We ought to get you home."

"I'm comfortable here." Francis sensed the pale old eyes examining him and he fidgeted; then, apologetically, Father Chandler's hand crept across and rested on his. "Francis, I wish it had not had to happen so."

Francis made an indeterminate movement.

"It's over. Over."

"But not for you, it seems."

Francis said nothing. Then Father Chandler whispered to the chauffeur. The car drove off.

As soon as he'd seen Father Chandler home, Francis tried to excuse himself and get away. He saw the old man comfortable, with a fire leaping in the study, and smelled the breakfast that was being prepared. They quibbled for a few moments about calling a doctor but Father Chandler chuckled and waved the idea aside. He patted his chest. "For my old friend? Why? We understand each other. He knocks at my door a little painfully but that's just his way." Then he insisted that Francis stay to breakfast and Francis' heart sank. The old priest had seen more than he had been meant to see. He was perturbed, for all that he hovered about jovially; he kept scanning Francis thoughtfully and Francis knew that soon the kindly process of pumping him would begin. He sighed. How could he word what was emerging, darkly and unsettlingly, from his mind?

He wished he'd had the strength of mind to tear himself away.

When they had finished breakfast, Father Chandler lit his pipe. He smoked in silence. A little old man in a dressing-gown before a blazing fire. Now it was peaceful. On the mantelpiece a thunderous clock ticked. Francis smoked a cigarette, hoping nothing would be said. Slowly, a sweet smile lighted up Father Chandler's face.

"Well, Francis?"

It had begun.

"I don't know that I want to talk about it."

"That's something you must decide for yourself."

Francis lifted his glance. He saw that the old priest's eyes, shrewd and inquisitive, were sparkling with concern. He stirred restlessly. There was a tremor in his heart—he was a little afraid to face his thoughts himself. And to voice them . . .? He made a dim sound: he knew that the tiny movement he gave then was both sullen and distressed. He had, in fact, suffered a considerable shock. He shook from it. Even now, he could not keep his fingers quite still. Then he heard Father Chandler whisper encouragingly. Francis muttered: In for a penny, in for a pound. So he began with an unsure laugh, "The Governor thought I was mad."

"Did he?"

"I don't blame him. I asked for it all right."

Father Chandler chuckled. "Well, you mustn't begrudge him his opinion."

"A cranky priest, he as good as told me. A religious screwball. Pardon the word. It was just that I was asking a lot too many questions. I think I rather got on his nerves."

"What was it you wanted to know, Francis?"

Francis shrugged. "Oh, about Orsini. The trial. All sorts of things." The Governor's cynically derisive face rose up before him and, again, it thrust diffidence, uncertainty, back into his mind. He wished intensely he hadn't begun to talk.

"But I'm not quite clear what it was he resented, my son."

"He thought I was being a bit clumsy and tactless, prying into the business. It was only a few minutes since . . ." Francis looked down.

Father Chandler said gently, "I wonder if it occurred to you that he might have been distressed and sensitive too?"

"No."

"You're very sure, my son."

"He'd done his duty. What had gone on before—all the strange twisted things that led up to it—they didn't concern him. He was a wheel in a clock. The one before him jerked round. That was his signal." Francis laughed curiously. "Orsini'd been passed on to him. Now it was his turn to pass him on to . . ." He saw that Father Chandler was staring at his fingers: they were weaving again. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Go on, Francis."

"It's so pointless . . ."

"I want to hear."

Francis said, "Oh, you could see what he was thinking. The law'd been through everything—a big scrupulous machine. Clever lawyers'd got it sorted out. And the judge had weighed it up fairly and given it to a jury of decent men. So exactly what was I getting at? Why, I didn't even know the case. Nothing. Not a thing about the crime! I'd just spent a few emotional minutes with the man they were going to hang for it"—Francis' voice faltered—"the most appalling few minutes one can share with a departing soul—and there I was, already smelling out some kind of catastrophe." Francis sought stumblingly for an expression: to shape some meaning with his fingers. "You know—like those people who find an odd bone and tell you all about the whole shape of the animal. Oh, I offended him all right. I see his point."

Father Chandler was huddled back in the shadows of his arm-chair.

"And just what did you get out of your bone?"

Francis wondered if Father Chandler could see the film of sweat on his face. And there was simply nothing he could do but laugh strainedly and say, "Doubt."

There was a silence. The clock ticked. Francis measured every beat. The long moments hung. Now Father Chandler was leaning forward curiously to see Francis' face more clearly in the firelight. He said, "But you're not an emotionally unbalanced young man. You must have seen something exceptional in poor young Orsini to be so affected?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Francis' glance flickered. "Just goodness: plain goodness."

Father Chandler's eyebrows shot up. He chuckled mildly. "Well, it's an element of human nature that's rare." Then he looked at Francis queerly. "Of course, you're speaking of a convicted murderer?"

"So the Governor reminded me."

"But I presume you thought him innocent?"

"I wondered."

"And still wonder?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

Father Chandler said softly, compassionately, "My son, at such moments the whole soul cries out for belief in the poor tormented creature's innocence! It was such an ordeal for you!"

Francis heard himself mutter angrily, "For me? And what about him?"

"He's gone. He is with . . ."

"I don't know where he is," said Francis harshly. "I don't know. I don't know any more."

Father Chandler looked shocked.

And, stifled, angry because he was being studied with such uneasiness, Francis said, "They've done him to death. Took him and . . ." Then he couldn't speak any more. He found himself shaking with rage.

He had done what he didn't want to: brought it back: in a rush, opened his mind's eye. He could remember that blank-looking door opening suddenly behind his back, and through it, in a place of harsh shadows, a glimpse of a mild sparrow-eyed little man, bald scalp gleaming in a naked light: a cool efficient step forward, like a dentist, beckoning almost—Francis closed his eyes: it was a convulsive effort to drop a shutter on his mind.

Father Chandler said, "Let him rest. He's atoned for his guilt."

"And if he were not guilty?"

"Why should you even think it possible?"

Francis turned to stare blankly into the old priest's eyes. "I saw him. If I can't believe what a man's heart tells me, I shall never know anything. Never. Not as long as I live." He raised his voice: he had to convince somebody. "He went with shining eyes. He was going to God." He said agitatedly, "Oh, I wish I could make you see . . ." Then he began again: he had to get his thoughts more coherent: there had to be a beginning and a middle and an end. He said, with more restraint, "Listen. He was devout. A true Catholic. He

confessed—but not to the sin for which they took his life. I pressed him. Again and again. I wanted desperately to absolve him. But he only smiled. He said, why should he go to God with a silly little lie like that on his soul? He said, privately, you understand?—as if he were giving me a tip nobody else ought to hear—'I didn't do it,' he said. And then: suddenly I believed him. I wanted to cry out . . ." Francis shook. "It was over while I was thinking: over, like a chicken on a block . . ."

Father Chandler fluttered his hand. Francis fell silent. He had appalled the old man.

For the matter of that, he wasn't so happy about his mental state himself. In less than an hour he'd torn up quite a few of his roots. He felt lost; he had to have somewhere to turn. Let a priest begin to wonder—to voice his "ifs" and "maybes"—and faith and reason could begin a conflict that would tear furrows in his heart. Francis made a gruff agitated sound. But now that he'd said so much, he could begin to focus: begin to narrow down this upheaval, driving emotion out of his mind. Of course, he'd never really know whether Orsini had been guilty or not! He just had doubts. And as long as he had them, he'd never wholly be at ease. Some things nagged him. He had such an unfortunate nature—it nourished niggling little uneasinesses like this! Oh, the trial had been scrupulously fair—why question it?—he agreed with the Governor, who'd thought him mad. The verdict had been brought in because the evidence—all that the prosecution could bring to bear, all that the prisoner could produce on his own behalf—had shown overwhelmingly that he had committed the crime. And Francis was revolting against it only because of an instinct; an instinct aroused by an experience about as harrowing as any priest could bear . . . But Francis sighed. He still had his doubts. Nothing would dispel them. Nothing. And he didn't know what to do.

He said with a queer chuckle, "I remember an old Irish priest I used to talk to at home. He had a parish in the Bronx. He was a fine man. Fine. And he told me again and again I'd never make a priest. He warned me, implicit belief

was an act of grace. I asked a lot too many questions, he said. He used to say to me, men were sinful, they made wars, killed each other—and if I wanted to know why, well, the answer was clear: they were purifying themselves with torment. Well, this —this is different. It isn't a big thing like war—it's such a simple little thing. A boy's life. He was so young. So full of promise. You didn't see him. I did. He'd hardly begun to live. And if he were innocent . . ." again Francis made that harsh distressed sound . . . "it seems so stupid. So futile, so cruel! I can't help thinking about his wife. His father and mother; his child. The wife—maybe she watched the clock this morning with horror. Her heart must have died. The father and mother—they must have asked themselves, is this why they brought him up with such pride and love—for an end as useless as this? And the child, growing up with that dark shadow for ever haunting his life. . . . If Orsini were innocent—it's the cruellest thing I've ever known. And I think he was: innocent. They say God watches the little sparrows . . ." Francis laughed wretchedly. "It does something to a man's faith."

Father Chandler said softly, "A priest without faith?"

"I don't know what to do."

"What did you know about the lad?"

"Nothing."

"About the crime?"

"Nothing! Nothing!"

Father Chandler leaned right into the firelight. His face was puckered, compassionate, his fingers making little motions, coming forward tentatively, as if yearning to infuse something into Francis' hands.

"Francis, you saw the last few threads being woven into the fabric of Tino Orsini's life. Then it was finished. The cloth was cast off. But the whole fabric?—it's hidden from you. You never saw it. Only those last few threads being woven in."

"They were enough."

"But if you'd seen the whole, who knows what you might have discovered? You might have seen a greater purpose than you know. For your own peace of mind, why don't you look for it, Francis?"

"It's gone. It's lost."

"No. Only a little out of sight. You must go out and find it, Francis."

"And if I did?"

Father Chandler smiled calmly.

"Why, I think it'd answer all your questions, my son."

Francis stared. For a moment, he wasn't quite sure what it was that was being suggested to him. Then his heart gave rather a peculiar leap. It was a warm throb: a surge of anticipation, surprise. The idea had never occurred to him. But he found himself saying reluctantly, queerly, "It'd be like turning over dead . . ."

Father Chandler patted him.

"The dead don't mind."

"I'm no detective."

"I shouldn't have thought there was a more passionate detective than a priest in search of the secrets of a soul."

Now Francis did not stir. He was staring at Father Chandler hard. He was, in fact, astonished at this sudden sharpening of his senses. Something minute and intimate had been aroused: it was leaping forward inside him, something eager and desirous. A real vibrant excitement—he couldn't sit quite still. He had an instinct to laugh out loud. Father Chandler, keenly, stared back. Then Francis nodded. He had an idea that his eyes were very bright. Whatever the old priest had kindled inside him, he felt, all in an instant, that he would never rest until he found out just what he wanted to know. To see what made up the pattern, of the very end of which he'd had the last fleeting glimpse—it provoked him. Stirred him: gave him new hope! Now he could hardly speak without betraying by a tremor the rising ardour in his voice. He had to go home soon. Impatiently, he brushed all that aside. America, the Bronx, were a dim distant world. It was here—here, in Soho—that something pregnant and peculiarly important to him lay! Even if it meant cabling, delaying his departure—he'd do it; hang on. He felt it so vehemently—this human pattern had a particular message for him. He had to pursue it: follow it to its source. But for all that, he said

evasively, "I'll have to cable the Bishop, ask if he can spare me . . ."

"I imagine he thinks a lot of you. If he knows it's important to you, I'm sure he won't object."

Francis half rose. Then, steadying his voice, noting the appraising glimmer in Father Chandler's eyes, he said, "How'm I to start?"

And Father Chandler chuckled, "Matthew. 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you'."

He got up. He went to the bureau, found a slip of paper and scribbled something on it. He came back, putting it into Francis' hand.

"This is where Orsini's parents live. They kept a wine-shop."

Francis took the slip of paper. Written on it was an address in Greek Street.

Father Chandler was watching him out of the corners of his eyes. He went on, "They're an old couple. You'll like them. Such vivid colourful people. They've really lived. They used to be circus performers. Of course, they're long past it now. But they still have the flavour. Oh, they'll show you all their souvenirs, old photographs—the shop is full of them! But they'll astonish you. Believe me, in their day the Orsinis used to be notabilities! They've travelled all Europe. The Flying Orsinis. They trained Tino to be one of their troupe. Good people. Nice people! They'll have a lot of interesting things to tell you about Tino, too."

Already, a bizarre picture of the old couple—aroused deliberately by Father Chandler, he was certain—was creeping provocatively into Francis' mind. He stared at the paper.

"And the wife?"

"She lives near-by. Let them know when you're coming. She'll want to be there."

Francis hesitated only for a moment.

"It's just that I don't want to hurt their feelings . . ."

But Father Chandler said deprecatingly, "Oh, my dear boy! You're a young man of tact and delicacy. And they're flesh

and blood. You're of their race. You were with Tino in the last moments. They'll be very glad and proud to talk to you." And then Father Chandler looked slyly at Francis. He paused. "You see, they feel like you about Tino. They swore he didn't do it. Swore it fervently. So I think you ought to hear what they've got to say."

Then a gaunt elderly female came into the doorway and stood looking at Father Chandler forbiddingly. She wore a black bombazine blouse and some jet ornaments that Francis thought had been out of fashion at least thirty years. She wore her hair piled up on her head, and though it seemed to be maintained by an infinite number of pins, stray wisps kept drooping all about her ears. She was Father Chandler's "daily". She ruled him with a rod of iron. She was very fond of him.

She said to him accusingly. "What're you 'opping about for? Now sit yourself down before I give you a piece o' my mind."

Father Chandler looked at Francis nervously.

"But I'm quite well, Mrs. Gibbons."

She fixed him with a glittering eye.

"Then 'ow comes it Joe just told me you've 'ad one of your turns?" (Joe, Francis presumed, was the chauffeur.)

"Oh, the merest twinge."

But she pushed him into his arm-chair and spread his rug across his knees. She tucked him in, muttering, "The trouble with you is, you're so ready for your 'arp and wings, you don't care what 'appens to you down 'ere." She had the untidy habit of sniffing, then drawing her finger underneath her nose. "Well, it's my business to look after you but don't expect me to go followin' you up above!" She said indignantly, " 'Ow am I to take care of you if you don't tell me when you've 'ad one of your turns?" Then she shook her finger so that her jet ornaments rattled. And she stood back, sniffing again, drawing her knuckle under her nose. "Always got to keep naggin' at you," she said. "Seems to me, that's the only way I ever get at anythin'—got to keep askin' questions all the time!"

Father Chandler stole a look at Francis. His eyes twinkled. "Mrs. Gibbons is a woman whose advice I wouldn't neglect."

The same evening, Francis wrote a short note to Mr. Orsini at the Greek Street address. But even as he posted it, he wondered if he was not putting his foot on a path that would turn out to be a good deal more devious than he knew. He had a premonition about it. A curtain had fallen on what he was certain was a dark turbulent story; he was stretching out his hand to pull it aside, and he could not make up his mind whether it would not be wiser to let it be. But for him, those concerned in it could rest in peace: he wondered if they would thank him for disturbing them like this. Still, he had half an idea that the family, withdrawn behind a wall of shock and grief, would put him off. Francis knew how proud and clannish a stricken Italian family could be. And, priest or not, his intrusion must be to them like the fingers of a stranger groping in a raw wound. So he was really surprised when, in the middle of the following morning, the desk clerk rang up to his room and told him that a small boy had brought a message for him.

"He won't leave it. He says he's been told to give it only to you."

"I'll be right down."

Francis hurried below. He found a dark-faced boy looking defiantly round the foyer. He had placed himself behind a potted palm. It was a quiet secluded hotel, generally so hushed that when the desk clerk's muted bell tinkled, everybody started petulantly and looked up. The boy stared at this scene contemptuously. He had his hands thrust in his pockets. He was olive-skinned. He was shabbily dressed. When Francis came up with a smile the boy's dark eyes searched him carefully. To reassure him, Francis spoke in Italian: "*Buon giorno.*"

The boy's eyes gleamed as if satisfied but he answered in English. "Are you Father La Guardia?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Orsini told me to give you this."

He gave Francis an envelope.

"Are you his son?"

The boy looked at him mockingly.

"Mr. Orsini has no more sons."

And with a straight back, arrogance in his immature young shoulders, he stalked off.

Francis tore open the envelope. He read the note. It was short. It was written on a piece of cheap notepaper, torn from a pad, in a livid blue ink. It had obviously been penned with considerable care. But it had a sober dignified tone. It said that Mr. Orsini and his family would be glad if Father La Guardia would call on them that evening at six o'clock when their shop was shut. They would regard it as an honour if he would eat with them. Their late son's wife also wanted to meet him. They looked forward respectfully to his company. It was signed, Piero Orsini. Francis could guess that it had been re-written several times. They did not want to say too much, they were cautious, yet uneasily aroused; and no doubt Mrs. Orsini had been peering over her husband's shoulder as he wrote it laboriously, prompting and correcting him. Francis smiled curiously as he read it. Then he rang up Father Chandler and told him that he already had a reply.

"Good," came the old priest's soft voice over the wire. "You've begun."

"I don't know. I've been wondering."

"Why? Don't be afraid. Go on with it."

"I guess I'm beginning to think I've started something I'd better have left alone."

"And would you be content with that?"

Francis was silent. Then he shrugged, answering, "No. Not now."

"You have to go on. See where it takes you. Believe me, it won't be you that holds the strings. God has them. Disentangle them. Follow them through."

Francis grinned crookedly.

"To a brick wall, maybe."

Father Chandler's chuckle floated over the wire, "Then walk through it. Miracles still happen, you know. All it needs is a little faith."

And the old man rang off.

A little before six o'clock, Francis made his way to Greek Street. He walked through Soho. The street lamps were lit. He felt at once that indescribable ease—smelling the familiar odours that came out of the garish restaurants and the food stores. There was a sound of music: rich and glutinous. It came from a glowing apartment over a shop. There was a theatrical costumier's, with spangled dresses and a velvet doublet, a breastplate and halberd; all looked blatantly false. And a door or two on was a seedy ballet-shoe maker, the satin stub-toed pumps in the window covered with fine dust, surrounded by curling photographs of ballerinas who must now be too ancient to hobble, and framed testimonials, brown with age. He caught some voluble chatter from open shop-doors: a wave of scent and mustiness and a gurgle of Italian came at him out of a barber's. They were closing up. And in a dark doorway two street girls stood and shivered and made the first false laugh of greeting, then fell silent as they saw what he was. He did not expect them to look after him. But he heard their chatter die away as he passed and he knew that their eyes were following him down the street. He found the wine shop. There was a dim reflected light within. He made out the rows of bottles in the window and the name over the door: P. Orsini. He went in. A bell shook and jangled on a coiled spring over his head. He waited in the half-light of the shop. He was aware first of the sweet odour of wine and spirits. He could see the shelves, ranged with gleaming glass, the flasks of Chianti, the wicker cages; a tourist company's advertisement was caught in a stray beam from the street lamp, a bold picture of sunlit Naples with a sea of unreal purple and a sky of rich Tuscan blue. Then the inner door opened. The electric light was switched on and a man came forward and looked at Francis searchingly.

"Mr. Orsini?" asked Francis.

The man nodded gravely. "Please to come in, Father. We have been expecting you."

He led the way into the parlour. It was small, very warm and redolent of food. Francis' eyes, faintly dazzled but

roaming, saw a religious picture or two: a madonna carved in brown wood: a bright tablecloth, formally laid for a meal. (The best silver had been got out, the least chipped plates, some prim serviettes and several bottles of wine. Francis could hear the hiss of an oven in the kitchen next door.) An elderly woman had just risen. She, too, with her deep sloe eyes, stared at him intently. And a young woman who sat by the fire, surprisingly fair, her hair very nearly ash-blonde, made a half-movement to rise, but since she held a baby on her lap, Francis beckoned her hastily to sit. "No," he said. "Please don't get up." Mr. Orsini, with great punctiliousness, said, "My wife. My daughter-in-law, Judith."

Francis shook hands with them. He thought the elderly woman muttered, "You are welcome here." The girl, quite English, said softly, "How d'you do." Then an awkward silence fell: all of them hovered uneasily on the edge of words. None of them quite knew how to begin. Suddenly,Francis felt desperately sorry for them. Mr. Orsini looked haggard, his wife's hand shook as she rearranged the bottles furtively on the table. It came to Francis with a great sense of shock; for many days now, none of them could have slept. He went straight across to the baby and chuckled over it; he put his fingers in the baby's, felt the pink hand grip, and made some twittering noises. It was as much to cover his own embarrassment. But the baby did a natural thing, and the most welcome of all: it belched. It broke the taut silence. All of them laughed with relief.

The girl, Judith, coloured and said, "He's just been fed. He does get the wind."

"No manners," chuckled Mr. Orsini. He had a voice that came deep from his chest.

"Piero, be quiet," said his wife. She seemed to be a masterful woman. "You were a little gentleman when you were a bambino, eh?"

"Me? A pearl!"

Judith wrapped the baby, she rose with it and went to the door. "He ought to sleep now. I'll get him tucked up." She smiled to her mother-in-law. "Mama, there's no need to come up."

But Mrs. Orsini, who could not take her hungry eyes off the child, murmured something gruffly and, with a muttered excuse to Francis, followed Judith out. Mr. Orsini became grave again. He drew up a chair for Francis. He wiped two glasses and pointed to the bottles. "Marsala? I can recommend it."

"Thank you."

"The very best in my shop."

He filled the glasses and lifted his. Francis saw his eyes once more examining him closely over the rim.

"*Buona salute.*"

"*Buona salute.*"

They drank.

Then Mr. Orsini said curiously, "You do not sound English?"

"American."

"Ah! Your family is from the old country?"

"From Sicily."

"Indeed? It is very beautiful."

"So my father tells me."

"My son was born there. Tino." The man's voice did not falter and he met Francis' eyes coolly. "Of course, it happened so by chance. You understand? We were performing there. Near Palermo. One day, the child knocks—so I hurry, excited, to the tent after the show. One of the women—a horse-rider, if I remember—says to me, 'While you were swinging up there he was born. A boy!' And she laughs and kisses me. And then she bursts into tears. I go into the tent, sweating, the marks of the bars still on my hands, the sawdust still stuck to my feet, and there is my wife with my little son. That is how we circus artistes are born. I, too, was born on the road. In a caravan in Switzerland! What matters? We are born, wherever nature wishes to take the chance."

"I'm told your wife was . . ."

"She was in my act. It was a small troupe. My father, my brothers and I. She joined the circus in France. She was very talented. She had great rhythm in her body. Very beautiful she was. Still is!" Mr. Orsini said proudly. "But then—then she had a body as slim as a stick. You would hardly believe it,

she could fly across the tent just like a bird, and when she leapt to me—I swear to you, I hardly knew it when she was in my hands. She never wore a net on her hair. It hung in a cloud down her back. She was so beautiful. She turned my heart. When my father retired, we married and started a new act."

Curiously, Francis studied him. Still strong and vigorous, Mr. Orsini's thick hair was now shot with white. His skin, olive-dark, was hard and lined. His hands, fretting with his glass, looked powerful. The knuckles protruded oddly like stones. But his body was heavy and barrel-chested: the lithe grace had long since gone from it. His shoulders were bowed. And there were cavernous hollows under his eyes. These, Francis saw, were black and intent. There was a shine like water in them, the water of a deep still pool. Francis took him to be a very tenacious man. The nose was straight, the mouth, even in that bulky grizzled man, was cleanly cut and had a tremulous hint of womanish charm. He must have been exceedingly handsome as a lad. He had a sincerity that really warmed you. It may have been that Mr. Orsini followed the trend of Francis' thoughts for he smiled crookedly. "Of course. I have changed."

Then Mrs. Orsini and Judith came in. Mr. Orsini's eyes lighted tenderly upon his wife and he smiled. His face shone. His wife stared closely into it, then, seeing its glow, guessing perhaps what he had been saying, her expression, so austere and remote, trembled and she too smiled. It was clear what an affinity lay between the two. And then that plump craggy woman, thickened with age, her hair drawn back tightly from her swarthy lined face, looked strangely shy. She said shortly, but not resentfully, "You should not listen to him, Father. Talk, talk, all the time!"

Judith caught Francis' glance and laughed.

"They were really marvellous in their day."

"So I've been told."

Mr. Orsini pricked up his ears.

"You have heard of us? The Flying Orsinis we were called."

"Father Chandler told me."

"Ah! Don't make a mistake. We were celebrities. Is a true word. Eh, Mama? Is not a fact?"

And Mr. Orsini got up with a sweep of his arm. "See!" Over the mantelpiece were rows of photographs, glassed and bound. He drew Francis eagerly to them. They looked old: some were blurred, you saw an unfocused background of tiers of faces: many had been written on: but Francis was entranced by them. He followed with his eyes Mr. Orsini's pointing finger. He saw the coiled body of a man, held stiffly in mid-air by the fleeting lens of the camera, his hands still curling to the bar from which he had leapt—and a woman, suspended by her knees from a distant trapeze, transfixed at some mid-point of a swooping arc as she stretched to catch him. The postures were fantastic; yet they suggested a breathless speed and daring; you could not look at the picture without a stir of uneasiness that that ball of a man, seemingly so helpless as he hung in the air, might plummet to the ground far far below. In another picture, a smiling young man and a girl sat side by side on a trapeze as, idly, they swung. They were Mr. and Mrs. Orsini. It was hard to credit the fact. They wore nothing but thin vests, trunks and tights. The girl's hair floated airily behind. And the young man's arm rested lightly but proudly on her back. Some of the pictures showed various members of the outfit, equestrians and acrobats; foreign faces, for the most part, many Orientals; a lot of the men ferociously moustached, some of the women with a Slavic plumpness swelling through their circus dress. A clown or two leered at you through his fantastic mask of paint. And there was a formal group, the entire circus family, posed with great seriousness outside the tent. Mr. Orsini pointed to a heavily-built man in a top hat, sitting in the foreground, with big waxed moustaches and a fierce expression on his face. He said softly, "That was Herr Rautenbosch. The daddy of the circus. He gave Maria away at our wedding. Remember, Mama?"

She said nothing. She nudged him, quite moved.

Mr. Orsini's finger went on. There was a photograph, now growing yellow, of a middle-aged man with an ardent Latin

face and a strongly-muscled body, standing amongst three youngsters, mere striplings; they looked like whelps around the old experienced lion. Mr. Orsini put his thick thumb on it. "My father. My brothers." His black-rimmed nail pressed on the smilingly naïve face of the slimmest and youngest of the boys. "And that is me." Francis laughed. The face had something familiar in it, Mr. Orsini's expression, no doubt. And then Francis felt a shock. His heart gave an odd tremor. It was a different familiarity that obsessed him in a wave; he couldn't imagine why he had not seen in it the startling resemblance to Tino right away. The face came with a terrifying reality out of the picture at him. He knew that Mr. and Mrs. Orsini were standing quite still. They had guessed his thoughts. Judith looked down; and Francis thought he heard her sigh. Then Mr. Orsini gave a strange laugh and said, "A lifetime of memories there! I would not change them for anything you could offer me."

Now Francis' glance stole to Mrs. Orsini. She was still staring—so Francis fancied—at the picture of the Orsini men, father and boys. She was devouring the face of her husband, oh, so young in those days! as if it brought vividly to life her own son. Her face was rocklike. You would not have connected it with that of the laughing young girl, sitting on the trapeze by the side of her man. Her skin was dark. She held herself erect, but she was no longer shapely—like many Italian women she had aged rapidly, gathering a hard massy bulk. Yet her eyes glowed with an unquenched fire. When she spoke, it was brusquely, but with resolution; she was not a woman to be swayed readily into changing her mind. Francis liked her. She was not unlike his mother, both had something passionate burning behind their stern eyes. Francis looked furtively from her to her husband, they stood very close together, wrapped in their thoughts; and he wondered how anyone could have guessed that once they had been slim and ardent and daring, that, trained to a hair's breadth, they had thought nothing of leaping like swallows through the air, swinging and darting from their frail bits of wire and bars high up in the dome of the tent. Their faces had gone blank. What

were they thinking? Perhaps for an instant they felt again the taut resilience of the ropes, the surge of spiritual exultation that lay in the sensation of flight: and the odour of tan and sawdust and circus beasts pressed hard on their nostrils. Out of a vivid past, they heard the uneven hum of a tense crowd: the cracking of the tent fabric over their heads. Gone, long since gone! It was sad. Age had stolen upon them—there had been maybe a winter or two when, in the dampness of the country, an unaccustomed stiffness came into their bones. Their suppleness went. Their muscles didn't seem to be responding so swiftly to their brains. Then suddenly a great risk appeared in their act. And one day they looked at each other and knew that their time was up. Ah, it must have been hard to leave that Bohemian wandering life, to put behind them the harsh dazzle of the limelights, the intoxicating applause, the friendly company of clowns and jugglers and the creatures of the ring. They counted their savings and slipped away to something like this: a café or wine-shop. An ageing Italian couple behind a bar—and how many guessed what a piquant history they'd had? Remarkable people. Francis felt quite moved. He said, "You must have travelled a great deal."

"Everywhere. Europe, America. Even India, once!" Mr. Orsini chuckled. "I could take you by the hand and lead you along every road from here to Marseilles."

"The circus was our home," muttered Mrs. Orsini. "We had no other. We were content with it."

"Then when our son grew to manhood, we trained him to take part in our act. At first we were afraid that he would not be strong enough. He had a wonderful balance, a rhythm in his body that was better than mine. But he was—how one puts it?—fine. So slim and fine! It would have been a great sadness if he could not have followed in our steps, our families have always been performers, handing on their skill from father to son. Then we saw that his strength would come. He was good! Good! When he was launched, we retired to this. We had saved some money. We were content to live our youth all over again in our son." Mr. Orsini's face darkened incredulously. "Then came this tragedy: this terrible tragedy."

He looked a little wild, staring at his wife as if even now he could not comprehend it. "So uncalled for. As if God had leaned down and slapped us in the face."

"Enough now," said Mrs. Orsini roughly.

"Maria—you know—comes from my heart!"

"We talk of it later. First we eat."

She had her ear cocked to the hiss of the oven next door.

"Be good enough to sit, Father."

Mr. Orsini controlled himself.

"Maria can cook," he smiled palely. "It was a great consolation to me that I married a woman who was as good at the stove as she was on a trapeze."

"Fool!" But she darted a fond look at him. "What will the Father think of you?"

They sat. Mrs. Orsini went into the kitchen, waving Judith, who rose to help, back to her seat, and returned with the first course. It was a delicately spiced *ravioli*. Francis had not eaten it since he left home. They chatted desultorily. Judith sat facing Francis. She ate little, and he could see that her thoughts were far away. Now and again he looked up surreptitiously to stare at her. She did not belong here. It was her colouring that was so incongruous, the silvery gold of her hair and the shadowed blue of her haunted eyes; by the side of the swarthy Italian couple she looked oddly remote. But it was clear that a great affection lay between them. She called Mrs. Orsini "Mama", and Mrs. Orsini used a soft Italian diminutive in replying to her. From a word or two, Francis gathered that she, too, had had something to do with the circus. A performer? Surely not! There was none of the springy suppleness of the athlete in that tender body of hers. Once she caught his eye and held it: she searched his face intently: he knew what she was thinking. What could he tell her about Tino that would not wrench her gentle heart? Her eyes fell back to her plate. A Nordic madonna, thought Francis; wrapped in a tragic misty beauty.

Then, suddenly, Francis found Mrs. Orsini leaning across the table, staring at him with a sultry questioning glow in her eyes. Her voice had grown harsh.

"Father La Guardia. I am a mother. You will permit me to ask?"

"Anything."

"When you wrote to us, we ask ourselves, why does this good priest want to hear about Tino? Is it just curiosity? Is it that he wishes to comfort us? Or is there something more that he does not care to say?"

Francis looked down at the table.

"I shouldn't have come."

"Maria!" burst out Mr. Orsini.

"Let him speak," said his wife defiantly. She had not taken her gleaming eyes off Francis' face.

Francis sought for words. (What could he say to satisfy them, that he could scarcely confess to himself?) "There's a certain question I have to ask of myself."

She flung back at him impatiently, tauntingly almost, "We have questions, too!"

"When I hear what you have to say, I may find the answer to mine."

But she shook her head. It wasn't the reply she'd expected to hear. Her face was a bitter mask. A tenacious woman, a real Roman matriarch, suffering from a devastating sense of loss that would burn her out like a candle. Mr. Orsini might learn resignation in time: his distressed heart would cry out, why, why?—but he would not fling up his arm and curse God if no answer came. But she—she was molten stuff, she would keep that smouldering grievance alight and take it with her to the judgment seat. Why, thought Francis, all in a curious palpitant moment, God would really have to tell Mrs. Orsini why. Now she leaned nearer, her brown face very close to his. Her wiry fingers pressed hard on his; he felt her nails bite deep.

"Tell us," she said brusquely. "I see it in your face! You do not think our son was guilty. No?"

There was a silence. The three were staring at him, barely breathing: Francis heard Judith's knife make a tiny rattle against her plate. Francis lifted his shoulders.

Then Mrs. Orsini gently patted his hand and sat back. "No

need to answer! Is enough. I am content. Now we can talk to each other with clear hearts."

They had almost finished the meal when the shop door bell clanged. Mr. Orsini threw Judith a swift glance and said, "Your father. Sit still, I go." He got up hastily and went into the shop. He came back with his arm proudly linked in that of a dapper little man of about fifty. He peeled off a heavy top coat. He was well-dressed. He paused only to warm his hands in front of the fire, then he placed them around Judith's face tenderly and kissed her. He stared keenly into her eyes. They had the same blue eyes, the same fair hair, though his was straw-like in texture; it stood up in untidy spikes on his head. He was wiry. He moved with quick decisive movements, like a restless bird. His dry face, astute and lined, was kindly. You didn't doubt that his blue eyes could, on occasion, go as hard as splinters of glass, but as they looked at his daughter they were as soft as a child's. No fool, thought Francis: he could be a dangerous customer and you might get more than you bargained for if you played tricks with him. After he had kissed Judith, he went across to Mrs. Orsini, kissed her affectionately on the cheek, then put his arm round Mr. Orsini's shoulder—he had to reach up to do it—and stood with his back to the fire. He stared at Francis.

"This is Father La Guardia," said Mr. Orsini. He explained hurriedly to Francis, "I told Mr. Chantry you were coming. He said he wanted to be here."

"You bet I did!"

"He can tell you a lot."

"I'm Pat Chantry," said Judith's father. He shook hands with Francis. He had a hard convulsive grip. "Tino worked in my circus. They tell you?"

"No."

"Well, he did. So did Judith. She was in my office—did some spells in the pay-box too. Piero told me you'd written. I wanted to know why. It's over. I don't know what good it'll do to open the wound." All the time he was measuring Francis with his eyes; it may have been that he felt satisfied, for suddenly he nodded and said, "We'll talk." He whispered

something hurriedly to Judith: Francis caught the words, "How about kissin' my grandson good night?" Judith laughed; Mr. Chantry followed his daughter upstairs. Mrs. Orsini was clearing the table silently. She left the wine, bringing in some brandy and a dish of nuts. A woman who found it hard to be still.

Mr. Orsini said in a low voice: "You hear much about our trouble from Father Chandler?"

"Nothing."

"But, of course, you have read about the case?"

"I wasn't in the country at the time. I suppose I could have got the old newspapers but I felt . . ."

"I am so glad you did not. Have a clear mind. Hear what you have to hear from those who really know. Pat will tell you most of all. Listen to him carefully. He was very close to Tino. It started in his circus, the whole terrible thing—Pat saw it all."

Then Mr. Chantry and Judith came downstairs and all of them drew up chairs and sat in front of the fire. Mrs. Orsini, silent as ever, came in from the kitchen and sat with them. For his wife and Judith, Mr. Orsini had poured out some sweet red wine. He poured a little brandy into glasses for the men and he and Mr. Chantry sipped reflectively, staring into the red coals of the fire. Mr. Chantry cracked some nuts: he rolled the walnuts expertly in his palms and with a convulsive pressure split them in half. His eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. Then he gave Francis a secret sidelong glance. He began:

"Piero and Maria used to work for me. That was in the days when you could take your circus anywhere in Europe—roll it anywhere—from Belgium to Turkey, no trouble at all! The Orsinis were my star performers. They didn't come better, take it from me. They'd already started training their boy. Tino was his name. They wanted to retire—they were wise, it's no joke going past your time, pretending you're as young as you were and you could still make your body do the same old tricks. But before they packed up they wanted to see their kid started off. They asked me to put him on the bill. I said all right. 'What can I lose? Turn him over to me,' I said."

"He disappointed you, perhaps?" smiled Mr. Orsini.

"Why should he? He'd had good teachers. He was still a kid, all long legs and sinew, but you could see Tino was going to do his people proud. He'd been brought up in the circus. Hardly knew what it was, not to sleep in a caravan or tent. Lived and ate and grew up round the Big Top. He used to run on with the clowns, doing a few tumbles with 'em. They painted his face for him. Good for a laugh! But all the time he'd been practising hard up on the ropes. So when Piero asked me, I put him in with a troupe. They gave him confidence. Everybody liked him. He was very gay. Kid, of course—but even then you could see that the girls were going to fall for him. Best-looking lad I ever saw." At this point, Mr. Chantry stole a look at Mr. and Mrs. Orsini. He hesitated. They were staring into the fire. Their faces were still.

Judith went on softly:

"That was before the war. Before I knew him. When he came back he was harder, grown up. But it made your heart ache with pleasure to look at him. He stood so straight. Chiefly, it was his eyes. I can't tell you: they shone. They seemed—oh, I wish I could put it in simple words, I can't, I can't—they were alight, it was as if he were giving thanks just for the joy of being alive. He was so young: so generous. The animals loved him. I've seen the horses move across the stalls, very slyly, as if they were doing something secret, just to put their heads on his shoulder and nuzzle him. I've seen Chiki, the tiger, roll on his back and purr when Tino put a stick through the bars and tickled him. He was the happiest person I've ever seen."

And then Judith said a peculiar thing:

"That's how I still see him. All the time the trial was on I had a funny idea. It was like a dream. It was as if I saw him climbing a hill, going higher and higher—oh, you could see he was strong and vigorous and he struggled on and on. And then at last he got to the top. He turned, up there on the skyline, and waved to me. I saw his teeth flash as he smiled. And then he was over the top. I can't feel that he's gone. He's just over the hill and waiting for me."

She bent her head. Her father gave her a long deep look. The Orsinis were devouring her with glistening eyes. Francis waited for Mr. Chantry to go on.

He said, "Well, I was telling you. When Tino's people left the circus I took the kid out with me on the continent. Our family's always run travelling outfits. We ended up in Italy."

"Who would have expected what happened then?" whispered Mr. Orsini.

"They grabbed him," said Mr. Chantry. "The Eyeties." He glanced apologetically at Mr. and Mrs. Orsini. "Sorry. You know what I mean. Things were just beginning to hot up. Everybody was talking of war—the Italians were mobilised. One day, in Florence, a couple of *carabinieri*—police—came sniffing round the tent. They said they were checking up on Italians of military age. They started asking questions about Tino. He was Italian born—but I told 'em his parents were naturalised British and resident in London. He was only a kid, anyway. Eighteen, I said! They went away. I don't mind telling you, I got frightened. The heat was really on. I told Tino he'd better grab the next train while the going was good. He could scuttle across the border and wait for us in France. He only laughed. He said I worried too much. Worried too much! The day we packed up for Turin, his papers came. He was to report for military service. I told Tino to run. He could still have made it. He wouldn't. He dug his heels in. He went right round to the *Amministrazione*—the police station—and I got the idea he as good as said Mussolini could sing for him: and if he couldn't sing, he could go suck his thumb. You can imagine what happened next. In two hours the *carabinieri* came for him. They had a truck and tommy-guns. They took him away."

Mrs. Orsini burst in, "What did he know of war? Of the *Fascisti*? He had only lived in Italy four days—the four days after he was born. He owed them no loyalty. It was cruel. Cruel!"

"I went to the British consul," said Mr. Chantry, "and kicked up a stink. It was no good. They were very polite, but as good as told me they wouldn't go to war over that. We hung on for a week, doing all we could—it was no use. The whole

circus was getting nervy. I had a bunch of every nationality under the sun. Who knew what was going to blow up next? I was sorry, but we had to leave him behind."

Here, Mr. Chantry paused. He sipped his brandy. He seemed to be reflecting, with knitted brows, summoning pictures out of a distant past.

"Then the war came. We never heard anything of Tino for nearly two years."

"We were mad with worry," Mr. Orsini broke in. "Then—at last!—a letter arrived. It had been posted in Tangier. Some friend of Tino's had posted it. What it told us! He was a soldier in the Italian Army. What did it matter? He was alive! Alive! He had fought across North Africa. He was in a tank, living in the desert, burning all day and freezing at night. But he was in fine health. He only waited—like all his comrades—for it to end."

And Mrs. Orsini took up the tale, "Then silence. For another year, no more news. Imagine to yourself what it did to a mother's heart! He might have been dead. Dead, out in the desert! And no one to tell us. A heap of stones in the sand—a stick with a helmet on it—ah, dear God, I thought of everything. Then we heard. It came from the Red Cross. Tino had been taken prisoner and he was in British hands. We were mad with joy! We waited. We got letters. The war ended. We only wanted him back." Her craggy face, shaken for the first time since Francis had set eyes on it, worked. She turned to Mr. Chantry gratefully. "Pat, you speak."

Mr. Chantry said, "Well, I got him back. I had a couple of friends in the Foreign Office who'd listen to me. I told 'em how Tino'd been picked up, that it was just damn bad luck, that his parents were British. Well, things settled down. Then Tino begged me to let him come back into the circus again. Of course, it was in his blood. And now he was a man, he wasn't a kid any more—the army'd hardened him. I said I'd be delighted. I had a couple of Hungarian trapezists who'd take him on. They weren't much, second-rate performers, but it was something to go on with. We started on the continent again. Holland, Belgium, France——"

Mr. Chantry grinned queerly. "That was when everything started. Soon after we got to Marseilles. That was when Tino joined up with Big Mike Ribble. He was a great red-headed Irishman with a crutch—he only had one good leg, but he did an act up on the wire that took your breath away. It was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. He took a fancy to Tino. Why, I don't know—he wasn't the kind of man you'd think cared two hoots for man or beast. They teamed up." Pat Chantry said softly, "I wish I'd fired Big Mike. Fired him or killed him first."

And now Mr. Chantry told Francis this strange story. Sometimes Mr. Orsini interjected breathlessly, sometimes his wife, and sometimes Judith's whisper stole in when her father was less sure of his facts. But out of their voices Francis built up a curiously composite picture of what had gone on in that travelling circus. Though he listened intently, a kind of indolence overtook him, their voices lulled him—it gave him the feeling that he was no longer a spectator of a drama long since played out, he seemed to be caught up in it personally: it was so vivid, it might have been a dream that leaves one shaken and half-incredulous when at last one wakes up, and only the taste and shock of it remain. He got to be less conscious of words than of smells and sounds and fleeting faces. He closed his eyes: and, oddly, the extraordinary tale leapt to life all the more keenly; it seemed to him that he could make out the acrid odours of the big tent, hear the thud of horses' hooves in the ring, the raucous hum of a great crowd, the screams of laughter as the clowns came tumbling on; and he was living palpitantly with the most outlandish people he had ever heard described.

"It all started in Marseilles," Mr. Chantry said.

THE CIRCUS

I

They had just left Avignon behind. There hadn't been much sleep for any of them that night. It had been a feverish turmoil of loading up in the dazzling light of the arc lamps, ready for an early move as soon as the sun came up. Now they were all very tired. It was nice to relax in the throbbing cab of the caravan and watch the mist-laden countryside go sliding by. It was a pearly morning, warm and very still; and since the convoy had left at dawn, it had the road almost entirely to itself. All one saw was an occasional farm cart, creaking behind its plodding oxen, with a blue-smocked peasant in a straw hat staring blankly as the garish circus vehicles roared past. There were about fifteen caravans and trucks in the convoy, with Pat Chantry's van and office-trailer leading the way. Tino's caravan came next. He leaned out of the cab to feel the breeze on his face and, looking back, saw the long line of the convoy curling behind: beyond, the road, as straight as most French roads laid down by the Romans, whirled away through the everlasting rows of plane trees that barely trembled in the translucent air. And in the distance the tall tower of the cathedral was beginning to fade into the glowing morning mist. Then, of a sudden, a green hill heaved in between. Avignon was gone. The sun caught the tree tops and flung their fantastically elongated shadows over fields and vineyards, sparkling with dew. It promised another glorious day.

Tino found Big Mike, crushed next to him in the cab, giving him a long sardonic stare.

"What are you grinning at?"

"It's a lovely morning, Mike. Smell it. The grass. The vines."

"All I can smell is the stink of petrol in this cab."

Tino chuckled.

"You've got a pessimistic nose."

Then Beppo, who was driving, began to whistle one of his *bistro* songs, "*Zoum La La!*" and Mike, his mouth curling in a thin grin, said, "Stuck here between a blasted music-lover and a beauty-worshipper—you wouldn't think we haven't eaten for ten perishing hours. Christ, my inside's crying out!" He gave Beppo a sharp jog with his elbow and Beppo, winking, shut up. But for once Mike's eyes were soft. Without knowing it, he picked up Beppo's tune and began to hiss it vaguely through his lips. Tino smiled sleepily.

"Golly, it'll be good to get into bed to-night!"

In about six hours, the little city of canvas and caravans, so swiftly uprooted in darkness, would plant itself on another pitch. There would be different faces in to-night's audience, a different *patois* perhaps; but the same exhilaration would roar through the tent—people always responded to a circus, no matter where you were. And when, at last, the company rolled over for a night's sleep well earned, the strange contentment that bound together that oddly-assorted band of artistes would brood once more over the camp. The same friendly sky sheltered them. It was the only life they knew and loved.

"I wouldn't change it," thought Tino. "Damn good life! Nothing to worry about—but live!"

Not that you could get Mike to agree. Sometimes, with his mocking grin, he'd say, "A lot of vagabonds, that's all we are! Nothing like getting yourself fixed up with a good music-hall tour. You do the big towns, Lyons, Marseilles—none of this damned roaming, sweating about mud and fields. Nice dressing-rooms, a roof over your head. Proper digs with a landlady who'll do you proud." He swore softly. "Sometimes I never want to set eyes on a circus again!"

But he never left it. He'd been with Pat Chantry a great many years.

Now he stirred. He eased his crutch. "Let's have the wine," he said.

Tino handed him the bottle. Mike drank.

"Here."

He passed the bottle to Tino. Tino smiled and shook his head.

Mike looked at him narrowly. "Wine and women," he said derisively. "What more d'you expect out of France?"

"Now, Mike, if I told you you'd only say I was a snob."

"Let's hear."

"Well, that wasn't a bad cathedral at Avignon."

"A lot of old stones."

"You ought to go in it early in the morning just after Mass. See the sun shining through the windows. It's so quiet, you can talk with your own heart. It isn't only a lot of old stones then."

Mike gave him a lingering look. The corners of his mouth turned up.

"What the hell have you been doing with your life?"

"Growing up in a circus. Fighting in North Africa. Sitting behind wire in a prisoner's camp."

"You wouldn't think it, to hear you. Why, you're nothing but a damned milk-sop."

"I know."

"You take it from me, the only pleasure you'll ever get out of life is satisfying your body. One of these days a girl'll get you and then you'll know what to do with your old cathedrals: put 'em where the monkey puts his nuts."

Tino murmured slyly that it might be rather hard.

"Yes." And Mike grinned. When he did, his big gaunt face lit up. "You want someone to look after you. Anyone could take you for a ride. You'd better stick with me!"

Well, they'd been together for some months now. When everybody in the circus heard that Tino and Big Mike were teaming up, they threw up their hands and said the partnership would never last. Nobody—nobody!—could get on with Mike. They worried about Tino. They thought he was young and didn't know his way around. He'd let himself in for trouble, there'd be nothing but quarrels. And when he wanted to leave the mad Irishman (as he would), he might find it difficult to hook himself up with someone else. Tino only grinned. He said he'd wait and see how it worked out. Now, looking back over the past few months, he could tell himself

that the association had worked out very well. Mike was still a customer nobody else in the circus cared to cross swords with, but with Tino he was always gentle; it was a miracle to everybody; the two, outside their rough chaffing, had never exchanged a single angry word. Why? Tino wasn't being immodest when he told himself the reason. The plain fact was that Mike was fond of him. The cynical Irishman, with his explosive fits of temper, was as patient as a mother with him. They practised up on the wires and bars endlessly and when Tino despaired because he couldn't get the hang of a trick Mike was teaching him, the Irishman only chuckled and sent him up again and again. He cursed Tino and derided him. His pale blue eyes danced cheerfully, he swore that Tino's hands were like elephants' pads; but when, sweating, Tino had mastered the trick, he was the first to put his arm around his shoulder—and, by God, it made you feel good! Tino was about twenty-five. Mike couldn't have been less than forty. But the disparity in experience was even greater. Mike had knocked about everywhere, he was as much at home in the unsavoury dockside slums of Marseilles or some squalid Parisian *bistro* as he was in the caravans. Well, their act had turned out a great success. Nobody could deny it. And it had all been due to Mike.

But still nobody liked the idea of the partnership.

Louie, the clown, who underneath his grotesque mask of paint was a benevolent and mournful man, came to Tino and said, "What do you want to stick with him for? He's a devil. I know. You listen to me."

Tino grinned.

"I'll tell you what, Louie, you show me his horns and I promise you I'll chuck up the act."

Louie's mouth went sullen.

"All right. You laugh. But you'll be sorry some day! He won't bring you luck."

Wouldn't bring him luck? Tino twinkled. (He couldn't for the life of him see what they worried about.) And he turned sideways a little in the cab to stare affectionately at Mike. He'd grown very attached to the big Irishman. A pity!—it wasn't a

feeling shared by anyone else in the circus. Mike, with his mocking eyes and mouth, was feared rather than liked; when he stalked through the camp, the approaching thud of his crutch made the light-hearted artistes and labourers look up askance. The Irishman's moods were uncertain, when you cracked a joke with him you never knew whether you'd get in reply a wink or the rough edge of his tongue. He was generally cheerful, often raucous: but you had the feeling that behind the good humour of his pale eyes lurked a great contempt for those who shared his laughs. He looked at the world with disdain, he kept himself to himself, and when the accordion was going in one of the caravans, thick with the smoke of the artistes gathered together in it, Mike usually sat in the corner with his leg thrust out and his crutch stuck between his knees. Even when he got a little tight, he was still only a sardonic spectator of the fun. He watched the flushed faces with remote glimmering eyes, drinking hard and smoking endlessly his cheap French cigarettes. The artistes were nervous of him; they thought him a queer card. Mike had been with Pat Chantry's circus longer than most. He was a "wire-dancer"—that is, he did his act, the grotesque business of a comic-aerialist, up on the wire—and whether you cared for him or not, you had to admit that it was one of the most astonishing performances you'd ever seen. To watch him clowning, balanced between leg and crutch on the wire, falling, swinging back on the hook of his crutch—it was a miraculous thing. Mike made light of his act, but he was always being sought after by other circus managements. Nobody knew for truth how he'd lamed his leg. The tendons were gone below the knee. But it was generally accepted that he'd been mauled by a bear in a music-hall act in Germany many years ago. His big face was hollow. His light blue eyes, shrewd and steady, burned in their sockets. His nose was big and aggressive. It gave him a bitter authoritative air. His mouth, well-shaped, was very sensual. And he stripped deceptively to a gaunt hard body that was incredibly strong. But his hair was his dominant feature, rich and red and abundant. It was like a magnet to your eye. He was a man who never talked about himself. He

was unmarried. If he had a past, nobody'd ever heard of it.

"A bad lot," grumbled Louie ominously. (Clowns, by nature, are pessimistic: and where Mike was concerned they saw the very worst.) "I'll bet there's plenty the police'd like to get their hands on him for!"

But to Tino there was something pathetic about Mike. He sensed the vehement power in the man; an inner strain. When he was a little drunk, it showed itself in his haggard eyes. Mike was searching for something, you knew not what.

Poor Mike! Not many cared for him. Tino wouldn't be too sure about some of the women, he'd seen them following Mike with their eyes covertly as he went swinging along. He knew that Mike treated them roughly. For all his advice to Tino about women he hadn't much time for them himself. And when one of the equestriennes, a plump young Russian and a bit bolder than the rest, threw out a hint to Mike that she wouldn't fight off his advances too strenuously (just so long as he made them) he told her what to do in language that made her ears burn. It had happened right near Tino in the tent.

"Missed a damn good chance, Mike," Tino grinned at him when she'd gone off.

Mike threw a savagely scornful glance after the equestrienne; she stood apart, full-figured and round-limbed in her tights, with red cheeks.

"Are you being funny?"

Tino looked at Mike curiously. They were at the head of the gangway in their costumes, waiting for the signal to go on.

"You didn't need to fly at her like that. After all, it was a bit of a compliment she was paying you."

"Shut up. I know what she's after. All she wants is to get her hooks in me."

And Mike shrugged as if he wanted to hear no more of it. But Tino persisted. He was a little perplexed by the frustrated anger on his partner's flushed face.

"You're a funny chap, Mike. You know? You don't let people like you. Rosa"—that was the equestrienne's name—"only wanted to give you something for love."

"I've no damned use for love."

The previous act was just finishing, the crowd was shouting as the horses pranced round the ring for the last circuit and the riders took their bows; and now Tino and Mike climbed swiftly up the ladder on to the pedestal from which was suspended Tino's trapeze and Mike's gleaming wire. They stood together on it, close to each other so that warm flesh pressed on flesh, treading resin into their shoes. Mike was fumbling with his crutch. Then Tino glanced into Mike's tight face, so naked-looking in the glare of the arcs. He whispered mildly,

"Some woman done you down, Mike?"

"Mind your own business."

"What have you got against them?"

"Damned nosey, aren't you? They're all alike. They start off wanting to give you something for nothing. All they want to do is be nice and loving, nothing permanent—oh, no! soon as you've had enough they'll be ready to shake hands and kiss good-bye and say, 'No hard feelings, it was nice while it lasted, it's all over now.' And your old man!" said Mike vindictively. (In the French, freely used, this had a certain earthy vulgarity and it conveyed exactly what Mike wanted to say.) "They know what they're up to! No flies on them! They're out to get hold of you, body and soul. They don't know that a man's got to have his freedom, sex is just one of his appetites—but with women it's everything, the beginning and the end. They try to smother you with love. Love? It's just possession! They squeeze the life out of you. They won't let a man have any other interests but them." Mike laughed loudly. "Women! They make me sick."

Tino had to chuckle.

"Mike, you trying to tell me you've always lived like a monk?"

And Mike's eyes glowed.

"Me? Not likely! But I'm damn careful they know just what I want out of them. And that's all they get out of me. Now shut up. You talk too much. We're off."

Of course, he'd only been pulling Mike's leg! (Not that he'd have used that expression with Mike—one good leg was all poor Mike had.) But now, as the caravan nosed its way

through the soft morning sunshine, through the vineyards, stretching on either side of the road in such trim orderliness that they reminded you of the kitchen of an exacting housewife, Tino recalled those little fits of restlessness that occasionally came over Mike. It wasn't easy to live with him then. And when these moods were on him, Mike's eyes had a yearning unhappy gleam. They seemed strangely to despair. Then suddenly he disappeared into the town and when he came back, generally the following morning, he was pale and shaken, and sometimes his hand trembled so much that Tino was frightened for him during the act; but there was no more strain in his face —it radiated an infinite sense of relief. Tino never asked him where he'd been. He could guess. Mike had found some woman to give him the ease from desire that his flesh cried out for—the desire that so imprisoned him that he hated it with all his heart—or maybe he'd gone straight to the town brothel and satiated himself into freedom there. You had more sense than to question him about it. You might as well be ready to duck the swing of his infuriated crutch. Once, after a period of such strain, he had disappeared for two whole days and nights and on the spur of the moment Tino had to double his act for him. A party went out and searched the town. They didn't find him. But when Mike came back one morning, pale and chastened, he met Pat Chantry's eyes with a defiant gleam in his. And Pat looked down and said nothing. Perhaps he understood. He sighed.

Tino smiled compassionately. You'd never get to the bottom of Mike!

His mind went back to the way he and Mike had first teamed up.

When Tino had re-started with Pat Chantry after the war, he was put in with two Hungarian aerialists. They were a shoddy attraction; their act had little novelty and both were older and stiffer than they cared to admit. They took to Tino at once. They realised that his swift grace was a valuable recruitment to their act. Everything might have gone along all right if Tino hadn't found himself caught up innocently in their domestic affairs. One of the Hungarians was engaged to a

girl who worked with the tiger-trainer. You had to regard the expression "engaged" somewhat loosely, for the two shared the connubial bliss of a single caravan. She was a buxom young woman with a roving eye; and she had plenty of time to use it, for all she did with her tiger-trainer was wear a filmy star-spangled sarong and stand with crossed hands and meek eyes, decoratively, outside the cage. She started deflecting her favours to the second Hungarian. The rows that sprang up were terrible. They swore to kill each other and when they went up to do their act with Tino, it made him uneasy to see the black hate they flashed at each other from their eyes. When one of them hung from the other's wrists, high up in the tent, it gave you a shock to realise that, with a twist of his hands, the upper Hungarian could easily have sent to his death his partner for whom he had such raging murder in his heart. But their artistic discipline was strong. There were no accidents. And when the act was over they slid down, took their bows smilingly with arms around each other's shoulders—to come to blows the moment they were outside the tent. Tino tried to calm them, but they were revengeful men. The act began to go to bits. The Hungarians wouldn't practise any more. They said it was hateful to have to touch each other more than they needed to during the act. Then one day Mike came to Tino and said, "What the devil d'you want to stick to those madmen for? You're going to get hurt."

Tino hardly knew Mike then, though he had seen him watching the act from the side of the tent.

"Oh, all in a day's work."

Mike used a single word to say what he thought of that, "B——s," he said. Then he looked at Tino in his odd sidelong way and added, "I've been keeping my eye on you."

"Picked up any of our tricks?"

Mike gave him a sharp look.

"Got a tongue in your head, haven't you?"

"Well, you know what it's there for," Tino grinned.

Mike didn't seem annoyed. He chuckled himself.

"See here. How'd you like to come in with me?"

"You?" Tino was surprised: it hadn't occurred to him that

Mike was as interested in him as that. "I don't know your kind of stuff."

For Mike was essentially a buffoon "wire-dancer". He appeared for his act in a ludicrous make-up—a bizarre suit and a red wig—your eyes widened with astonishment the moment they were laid on him.

"Oh, we could mix it all right. I don't mind a bit of straight trapeze stuff as a relief to my funny business. I'm not so bad on the bar myself."

"I'd like to think about it."

Mike saw that this was no outright refusal and that Tino was aroused: so he said nothing more than, "Don't take all week," and went stalking off.

That same night, Pat Chantry spoke to Tino. He was a bit disturbed by Mike's proposition, he said,

"Oh, I know those damned Hungarians are no good to you! Between you and me and the tent-post they're going to get the push. But I'm not sure I like the idea of you going in with Mike."

"He's clever."

"He's a devil to deal with."

"I think we'd get along, Pat."

"You don't know him the way I do." Then Pat said curiously, "He said he likes you."

"Why?"

"I don't know. He's a funny chap. I'll have to give it a think."

The matter was settled for them by the hapless Hungarians. There was a quarrel between them that led to the worst fight of all, it raged in the caravan until the windows went and the strong man of the outfit, the tiger trainer—who had now succeeded to the girl's favours (she was sick and tired of goulash and czardas, she said)—had to go in and bump their heads. There was a certain sexual humiliation in this. It quietened them. But it was the last straw. In the morning they were gone. No one ever saw them again.

Mike came to Tino in the wreckage of the caravan and said, "Well, that's that. We'll start working out our new business to-morrow."

"I haven't said I want to, you know."

Now Mike stared at him. They held each other with their eyes for an appreciable time. Mike struggled between anger and amusement; then, with a crooked smile, he said, "What are you worrying about? I'll look after you."

"I'm not so bad at looking after myself."

"I've taken a fancy to you."

Tino studied Mike intently. The big Irishman's eyes seemed remarkably bright.

"All right," said Tino thoughtfully. "If Pat says so."

"It's a deal."

Mike held out his hand, Tino took it; and an hour or so later, he saw Mike and Pat arguing vociferously outside the tent. Pat shouted for Tino.

"Tino, you want to team up with Mike?"

"I don't mind."

"That's not good enough."

"Well, all right. I'd like to join up with him."

Pat shook his head worriedly. He still wasn't convinced it was for the best.

"I'm responsible to your mum and dad." He shrugged. "We'll try it." Then he turned to the big red-headed Irishman with asperity. "Now, Mike, you see that Tino gets a good place in the act! He's a fine trapezist. I'm not going to have him shoved in to do a couple of side turns as a bit of relief from you."

Mike's eyes gleamed.

"Don't worry. He'll get a better spot than he thinks."

"I'll be watching out."

That had been some months ago. Now they were a team. It couldn't have turned out better. Mike was generous; he worked out the business so that Tino's skill shone all the more; he was really clever in the way he mixed it, so that one moment the crowd was roaring at Mike's clowning, the next moment tense and silent as Tino's aerial work flashed in and gave, of a sudden, an exciting reality to the act. Mike showed Tino one or two tricks in which he appeared at his best. It meant unending practice and back-breaking sweat. They never tired.

They got the act to a pitch of perfection that was worth every ounce of work. It had a wonderful climax in which Mike abandoned his comedy, swung from his wire to a trapeze and when Tino did a double somersault from his bar, caught him with the hook of his crutch. It was a breath-taking turn, and dangerous. Within a month, Pat had put the act in the best spot on the bill.

"Got to take off my hat to him. Clever bastard—he's done wonders for both of you!"

He had to admit that the partnership was an eye-opener; he'd never have credited it, he said, not in his wildest dreams.

Tino's musings ended. The caravan jolted and began to slow down. They were passing through a village and the convoy was swerving to the side of the road. They pulled up outside a little café. It had a rose-covered arch and some rough forms and tables set against the whitewashed wall. As the line of trucks and caravans came to a stop, the crowd of performers streamed down and sat. A sluttish wide-eyed girl and her father came out to serve them and, ravenously hungry, they ordered bowls of coffee or wine and bread. The women produced sausages. In a few moments a little crowd of children and their elders had gathered interestedly in the village square to watch. They had never seen so motley an invasion as this. The artistes, who had thrown themselves down to sleep after the night's labours, still wore bits of their costumes and their faces were only sketchily cleansed of grease paint—the tiger trainer wore his silk bandeau and Rosa the Balkan dirndl in which she did her equestrienne act. Tino left Mike, who had sat down with Beppo, and made his way over to the table at which Judith sat. In the morning sun her head gleamed. Its pale gold, so rare in that part of France, came near to silveriness: even in that garish crowd it took the eye. Her light linen dress looked fresh. She was alone. Though usually she sat with the rest, she was the boss' daughter and, as such, it was a matter of delicacy on the part of the artistes not to force their company on her.

She laughed as Tino came and sat.

"Let's eat," he said briskly.

"Hungry?"

"As a horse."

They caught the eye of the serving girl and ordered coffee and bread. It was pleasant, the sun came through the arch and dappled their faces; across the square, a little church and a cream-coloured stucco *Hôtel de Ville* glimmered dreamily, like cats basking in the morning's warmth.

"Tired?" asked Judith. Her eyes studied Tino affectionately.

He stretched. "I could sleep."

"Why don't you take a nap in dad's trailer on the way?"

"It's more fun to sit and talk to Mike."

Her glance went across to Mike and Beppo; they sat together on a form, Beppo slopping his bread in the coffee, eating with the haste and relish of a man utterly absorbed in his food. But Mike, leaning back lazily, was watching them, slyly amused.

"Mike never takes his eyes off you," Judith said.

"He likes to know what's going on."

"What's tickling him?"

"Us."

"What about us?"

Mockingly, Tino's eyebrows went up.

"He thinks it's a very good thing for me to have my eye on the boss' daughter."

Her face softened; it was the kind of chaff they often indulged in, but it never failed to leave her pink. Then Tino put out his hand and rested it on hers. They stared at each other brightly, contentedly. The understanding that had grown between them was a strangely tranquil thing. They rarely spoke of it, they were utterly at ease in each other's company, and without thinking much of it they knew that when Tino got on a bit they would settle down. They had made no plans. Judith knew that Tino was wrapped up in the circus; he wouldn't find it easy to give up his work on the bars. And while she felt that it had a danger and insecurity that would trouble her once they were married, they were both young: she was content to let things take their natural course.

Now the girl appeared with their food and sought awkwardly to place the tray without disturbing their clasped hands.

"Eat your breakfast, Tino. You'll have everyone staring at us."

"Let 'em."

But they laughed out loud. Without more ado, they fell on their food.

Then Tino looked up. Suddenly, he caught Mike's eye. Tino could guess what was going through his mind. He thought Tino was a damned fool not to give up his act in the circus and settle down to a cushy administrative job. He often said that Tino should have his head examined—a lad who'd risk his neck up on the ropes rather than plant his bottom squarely and safely in the office-trailer with Pat Chantry couldn't possibly be all there. "She's a bit of all right," said Mike. That was a begrudging compliment from him: he always came back to it. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"What's the hurry?"

"She's a good-looker. You must be blind! By God, don't you feel your bones melting to grab hold of her?"

"Now, Mike, you don't really expect me to answer that!"

(But now Tino stole a soft glance at Judith. Her hair glistened. It was really delectable. Her wide brow was calm, her skin clear, and her blue eyes very gentle. Her figure, neither full nor particularly slim, seemed to bud: it was tremulous with promise. Tino always felt at his most peaceful with her. When they wandered across the meadows after the show or settled down in some nook in a hedgerow, she was soft and fragrant in his arms and made his heart beat; though, of course, it wasn't the searing passion Mike had conjured up. It was a deep ineffable comradeship: the great contentment that she would make a perfect wife and a wonderful mother to his kids. And better a hundred times, he thought! He knew his own nature. One of those blind reckless passions could so swiftly burn itself out in his Latin blood. He looked at Judith gratefully and felt his heart turn over. She shone: she was gold.)

But he couldn't help thinking about Mike. Mike was always urging him arrogantly, "Don't waste time! You take it from

me, it was a damned clever chap who said a young man's best profession was to marry his boss' daughter. All he had to make sure was that the boss didn't have any sons."

"Why didn't you take the chap's tip?"

Mike said coolly, "He didn't say anything about men with one leg."

There was no doubt about it, Mike really wanted to do the best for him. He only wanted to see him safely settled down.

"What would you do without me, Mike?"

Mike said roughly, "I got along before you turned up. Get married, I tell you. Judith's all right. She'll look after you."

"I thought it was you who wanted to do that?"

At this, Mike gave him a strange look. Then he said harshly, "Me? I'm no good to anybody! She'll stay with you as long as you live."

When they had finished their breakfast, Pat Chantry came up. He had a sheaf of papers in his hand. He looked short-tempered: his eyes were red-rimmed, he had not even had the brief sleep afforded the rest. It was a troublesome time for a circus manager, each one of these shifts. He said fretfully, "By George, you wouldn't think we had a show to get ready for to-night!" He looked around at the performers, lolling blissfully over their food.

Judith touched him. "They have to eat."

"Artistes weren't so blasted particular when I was a kid. You finished?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Come on then, let's move."

He shouted and strode across to his trailer. The performers looked at him lazily and with no great urgency rose. Judith pressed Tino's arm and followed her father. The crowd streamed back to the trucks and caravans. As Tino went after them, he passed Rosa; standing quite still, she was watching Mike laughing with Beppo as he hobbled off. There was a baffled expression on her face.

She threw at Tino ironically as he passed, "He's in a good humour to-day, eh?—your pole-legged friend." Taken at its

face value, this description—which was in French—was transparently naïve; but the emphasis she used and the bit of embroidery she added to it gave it a shocking significance; and Tino's eyebrows shot up.

"Now, Rosa," he said reproachfully, "you don't want to say that."

"I know what I want to say. *Il est méchant, le numéro.*" ("He's a bad lot, that chap.")

"Only a bit blunter than most."

"Blunter?" She flared up. "He's no gentleman!"

Tino chuckled.

"I don't think even Mike pretends to be that."

Then she looked down at the ground. For a moment, Tino had the astonished impression that she was going to cry.

"He was intolerably rude to me."

Tino shrugged. ("Women!" he thought.) However, he took her arm consolingly. He said gently, "Anyway, you can always be glad he won't bother you now."

"But he will always bother me. That is the misery of it. He is a most attractive person to me, my friend."

Tino had to stand and stare at her.

"Who? Mike?"

And a little cry was wrung from her reluctant lips.

"My poor boy! Can you not see that he is a very sensual man? Is it not plain on his face? Have you not observed his hands? So white, so thin, so masterful? And that leg of his—it gives him something pathetic that makes a poor woman's heart wrench! He hates our sex. That provokes a woman. You understand? It would not make her like him any the less. *Merde!*" (This was only a little more offensive than *numéro*.)

"I hate him!"

"Rosa, not so loud, he's looking at you."

"The beast. He is detestable! But," she added imploringly, "tell him if he changes his mind about me, he has only to speak."

Tino went back to the caravan thinking that if men were sometimes difficult to understand, women were a downright enigma. He climbed into the cab. Mike moved over and settled the crutch comfortably between his knees. He was

watching Tino with bright inquisitive eyes. Then Beppo started the engine. Pat Chantry's trailer nosed into the road. The convoy went grinding after it.

At length, Mike broke in,

"I saw you talking to Rosa. What was she saying about me?"

"How do you know we were talking about you?"

"I'm not blind. Come on, damn you. What did she say?"

Tino chuckled. "She said if you took a fancy to her after all, she's willing to forgive and forget."

At this, Mike broke into a great raucous laugh.

"Thank her for nothing. That's no way to get a man."

"Oh? What is?"

Now Mike gave a sly sidelong grin.

"Why, laugh in his face. Snap your fingers at him. Make him think he's less than the dirt beneath your feet. Vanity! That's the way to get at a man. Women are blasted fools. They don't see it. And a good job, too. If women woke up to it, Christ, what a dog's life they'd lead us. We wouldn't have a chance."

Then he saw Beppo hanging over the wheel perilously, listening with mouth agape. "*Sans blague?*" whispered Beppo. "No joke?"

But Mike gave him a violent shove.

"Watch the wheel, you fool! Do you want to pile us in the ditch?"

After this, Beppo was silent for a little while. He pondered. "Well, you can say what you like, Mike, and good luck to you. All I know is this: I go out with my girl because she's got a pretty face, a soft body, warm breasts and wonderful legs. We don't have time to think about vanity. When we get tucked in, take it from me we just get on with the job." And a soft grin spread all over Beppo's smug face. "Of course, I'm only a clown! But in our old-fashioned way, we enjoy ourselves. Oh, la, la!"

And, thought Tino chucklingly, old-fashioned or not, a man couldn't say fairer than that.

. . . . .

They arrived at Marseilles, stiff and weary, late in the morning. The convoy skirted the old town. Passing through the narrow streets, they saw that a number of their streamers—"Cirque Anglais de Pat Chantry"—had already been hung. And soon they caught sight of some of their bills on the hoardings. It always gave Tino a little thrill to see his name on the bills. It came after the tiger, in a place of prominence. "Ribble and Orsini": that was how their act was billed. At length, the convoy arrived at the pitch reserved for them. They were relieved. It was a good firm piece of grassland in the suburbs. A gasometer towered over it and the little grey houses and tenements stretched from it to the centre of the town. Pat Chantry got down and surveyed the site expertly with Louie; both were old hands at laying out a pitch. In a few moments they had decided on the location of the Big Top and the tent-master shouted to the drivers. Slowly the caravans jolted over the grass, manœuvring themselves into place.

Now they all climbed down, flinging themselves on the grass. The women began to boil tea. The sun blazed down. Mike lay on his back, his face carved sharply to the bone by the fierce white light. Soon smoke was curling from the caravans. Pat fidgeted impatiently. He was in a fever to begin. But he knew that a stiff and sullen bunch of men would do less than if they were given a little break and the drink they craved in the afternoon's heat. At length, the tent-master blew his whistle. The arduous business of rebuilding the circus began.

First, the great tent went up. The centre masts, the huge king-poles, were laid and the shapeless mass of canvas carefully spread; only when it had been correctly centred was it hauled up and roped. The breeze was gentle and the vast expanse of canvas, that in a stiff wind could be so intractable, did not billow; it gave little trouble and soon the sledge-hammers were ringing on the steel spikes to which the tent was guyed. Another gang was putting up the stable and menagerie tents. Soon the men tore off their shirts; they were dripping with sweat. Pat Chantry began to look less harassed. He was always haunted by the fear that the circus would never be erected in time for the performance that night. But now that

he could stand back in his shirt-sleeves and see the Big Top reared majestically, taut and firm and securely staked, and the minor tents springing up beside it, he had to smile under his sweat. The aerialists, Tino amongst them, went swarming up into the heights of the tent to fix the arc-lamps and spots. The tiers of seats sprang up. It was now that the tent-master could begin to supervise the laying out of the ring. It was an intricate art. But the ground was good; and when it had been somewhat broken up, the surface of clay and sawdust was laid. And when, at last, the glittering steel pedestals of the aerialists had been erected, the main labours were over. Louie made the graceful gesture of sprinkling a pretty arabesque of sawdust inside the ring. The men threw down their hammers and laughed and clapped.

Now, into the sunshine of the field, came the animals; the elephants first. They swayed across the meadow, their trunks sniffing at the fragrant grass, their dim patient eyes unconcerned. It gave one the oddest tremor to think how easily these vast creatures, so elemental, so unconscious of their strength, could trample down the frail caravanserai of rope and canvas that imprisoned them. The truck with Chiki, the tiger, rattled past. It was with a lambent sullenness that Chiki surveyed the bright new vista through the bars of his cage. He was hungry; he disliked the restless tempo of these recurrent shifts. Then came the horses; the aristocratic Lippizans and Arabs, nervous and graceful; the hairy little ponies from the Russian steppes. They winced as the tiger gave his soft irritated coughs. But the stables were ready for them, spread with straw. The saddles and the gay trappings of the riders were hung on the stall-posts. And when Chiki was reduced to a ferocious silence as his meat was thrust through the bars, something of a lull rested on the field.

The company had now about three hours in which to eat and rest.

Mike and Tino ate. Then they went to the caravan, where Tino lay down on his bunk. Mike, a cigarette dangling from his lips, sat playing patience; every now and again his eyes, crinkled against the smoke, looked up at Tino but he did not

speak. It was hushed in the caravan; thus, Tino fell asleep.

He woke to find Mike touching his arm.

"It's time."

Tino sat up with a start.

"Right. I'm with you, Mike."

They slipped into their costumes. Tino could hear the din of the crowd, the music of the band. His ear, noting the tune, recognised that they had reached the end of the interval that divided the evening's bill; Mike had let him sleep very late. They put on their dressing-gowns and passed into the changing tent where the company sat, chattering, waiting for the performance to recommence. Then the band struck up a gay air. There was a roll of drums and the clowns rose hastily, crushed out their cigarettes and ran through the gangway; through this tunnel, beyond which lay the hotly-lit arena, they went tumbling on. For Tino this was always a moment of the most tremulous exultation. He could never repress the sense of excitement that took him, sometimes with a little tension in the stomach, as the time of their appearance drew near. They watched the antics of the clowns and did not stir until Chang's tiger act commenced.

Then—at a nod from Mike—they moved into the gangway.

Here, the heat of the arena struck at them. The tent was full. Through the dazzle of the limes, through the mist of smoke that was wreathed in the tent, they could see the rows of faces absorbed in the turn. A great raptness lay in the silence, broken only by Chiki's bronchial grunts; the big striped beast leapt dutifully, towered and spat. It was time to go up. Tino caught Beppo's eye—it would have been difficult for a stranger to recognise Beppo's bovine countenance under the crimson-slashed mask of paint, the shambling idiocy of his wig—and Beppo winked. Tino smiled back. His heart beat. Judith, standing in the shadow of the gangway, gave him a fleeting nod. Then, silently and unobserved, out of the beams of the arc lamps, he and Mike climbed swiftly up on to the platform. They trod the resin into their shoes.

As the band crashed into the opening bars, the great limes leapt up and fastened on Tino and Mike, standing on high.

Down below, the sea of faces turned expectantly up. Mike whispered, "Let's go." He gripped his crutch. Tino released the bar of the trapeze; poised himself and leapt.

First, he locked his ankles to the bar, sweeping inverted across the tent. His slim body hurtled back to a knee grip and he somersaulted rapidly round the bar. It was, in effect, a curtain-raiser, no more. It titillated the appetite of the audience. The band was playing the melody Mike had carefully selected for their act. It was the drinking song, Verdi's "*Libiamo, libiamo*" from *La Traviata*. The bandmaster had not thought it well chosen for the turn, he argued again and again that an aerialist's act called for something martial and stirring—a Sousa march, perhaps. He wanted the clash of cymbals and the awesome roll of drums as the climax approached. But Mike told the bandmaster to go to hell. It was to be "*Libiamo, libiamo*" or nothing. And as it transpired, he was wise. For the gay, yet nostalgic, melody with its long catchy rhythm ideally suited both the trapezist's swing and Mike's tricks. Now Mike took the limelights, and with a deceptive airiness began to cross the wire, springing from it with a light bounce, from foot to crutch. He wore a loud check suit—of a type that the French call inaptly an "English sporting"—a fierce red wig and a florid ginger moustache. He was ludicrously made-up. A small black bowler hat was firmly clamped on his wig by a thin elastic band. Despite this, the sight of him was at first apt to give the audience an uneasy twinge. It had a disconcerting note; they felt, perhaps, that it was not something to be laughed at—eh? *fantastique*—a one-legged man so precariously tottering on that wire. It was macabre. Then, of a sudden, the incredible assurance of that red-headed maniac swept over them. They forgot the infirmity, the crutch, they began to shout and laugh as Mike tottered and dropped and with a disarming agility bounced back. The hat fell off. *Farceur, va!* He was a comic: a figure of fun! Of course, Mike had the eternal gift of the clown; he was the helpless oaf whom God looks after when he places his clumsy feet awry. And a gale of hilarity shook the tent. Sometimes Mike exchanged his crutch for a shooting-stick,

getting trapped in it—finally sitting on it in the manner of an English milord viewing the races. The audience fell into his mood and watched his crazy cavortions with bellows of glee. Then, as Mike reached the end of the wire and the audience gasped at his final stagger, Tino flashed in with his trapeze. The faces of the crowd grew tense. Youth and agility were skilfully joined to burlesque—and it was a relief from sheer belly-laughter to watch the supple figure of the trapezist hurtling through the motions that made them instinctively shrink.

And so the climax came. Mike tottered on his wire to the hiss of the crowd—hooked his leg on the trapeze and swung with all the appearance of helpless imbecility across the tent: and without an instant's pause, Tino leapt. He turned a double somersault and there, in thin air, found—as if by mere accident—Mike's crutch as the Irishman dangled crazily. It was breath-taking. It seemed to have all the appearance of a mischance that, only by a miracle, only by the benevolence of God, had not turned into a fearful disaster. But, of course, it had been timed to a hair's breadth: in the few seconds during which the feat had been performed, the flying figures had worked in perfect synchronization, their two brains clinging together by a subtle affinity. Yet the physical effort had been appalling: nobody knew what a strain was placed upon their muscles in that spasmodic wrench! And, emotionally rather than by the workings of their mass-mind, the audience realised that they had seen something extraordinary. They shouted. Tino and Mike took their bows. Breathless, as the limes leapt away from them, they slid down the ropes.

It was over and done. Tino felt as though he was walking on air.

As they went down the gangway, sweating and happy, Mike slipped his arm around Tino's shoulder.

"That was a bit of all right."

"You bet!"

Then Mike grinned,

"Hurry and get changed. I know a place in the town where you can get some decent food."

"Suits me."

"It's a low dive, but you won't get a better *bouillabaisse* anywhere in France!"

Tino went into the changing tent and, stripping, climbed into the tub. As he swabbed himself he whistled. It was "*Libiamo, libiamo*" around which his lips unconsciously formed themselves. Through a gap in the tent roof he saw the stars shining brilliantly in the pearly night. The air was like wine. The cold water made his body tingle. And he was ravenously hungry. By golly! It wasn't a bad world to live in, he thought.

II

The following afternoon, Pat went into Marseilles to see the booking agent who was arranging their tour through Lyonnais and Provence. He came back jubilant. It was obvious that the circus had got off to a first-class start. He took Tino and Mike aside and rubbed his hands.

"We're going to be all right. Marcel"—he was the booking agent—"says we've given them the best bill they've had for years. He doesn't see why we shouldn't do good business for over a month."

Mike said lazily, "Suits me. I suppose he told you it was Tino and me who practically made your show?"

Pat chuckled. He was in too good a mood to take offence at Mike's chaff. But he threw at him a long shrewd look. "Never mind all that. He gave me a darn good tip."

"Oh?"

"I want you to go into town and see a girl to-night. Marcel thinks we could use her. She's in a wire act at the music-hall. With a couple of Poles. Of course, they're terrible, but she's got something—I'm not sure what. The show doesn't start till late. You've got time to slip in after your act and have a quick look at her."

Mike shrugged disinterestedly.

"What's her name?"

"Sarah Linden. It's the third turn after the interval."

"All right." Mike thought curiously. "But I don't know where you could fit a solo on the bill."

"Oh, she's not good enough for a solo."

"Then whose act are you putting her in?"

Pat did not answer for a moment. Then he said, "Yours, if you want to know."

Mike's jaw dropped.

"By God, you're joking!"

"I'm not. I'm serious."

Now Mike's face went red. He stood up abruptly and glared at Pat. "What's wrong with our act?"

"It's fine."

"Then what do you want to shove some girl into it for?"

Pat's face had gone somewhat cold. Mike's rages always had the effect of stiffening him.

"That's my business. But I don't think it'd do you any harm to get a feminine touch into your act. It'll be good for Tino. He doesn't really get a chance to show what he can do. He and the girl can work up a routine and come in on your usual stuff."

Uncomfortably, Tino said, "You don't need to worry about me. I'm satisfied."

"You leave this to me. The two of you go and see the girl. She's all right. I'm telling you, I know."

And since Mike seemed disposed to argue, Pat ended the discussion by turning on his heel and walking off.

Mike's eyes gleamed after him.

"He's not going to pull that on me. I'd rather walk out on him. We wouldn't be short of bookings. Damn him. We don't want any fifth-rate little puppy from a cheap music-hall mixing in with us."

He was in a restless mood during the night's performance. He did not refer to the matter again, but it was obvious that he was brooding on it; indeed, Tino thought that he hadn't the slightest intention of going into Marseilles to see the girl. But when their act was ended, Mike said shortly, "Let's get it over and done with. We haven't got a hell of a lot of time."

They took a bus into the town and when they arrived at the

music-hall, found Marcel, the booking agent, in the foyer awaiting them. Pat had rung him to expect them, he said.

"Now hurry. She will soon appear. I have seats for you. You will be most interested in her. She is really promising, be assured by me!"

Marcel ushered them into the theatre, and with a good-humoured obstinacy compelled an entire row of people in the stalls to stand up and make way for them so that they might sit near the centre, though there were innumerable empty seats at the side. He created a great deal of noise and aroused some acrid comment from the audience. Thereafter, he proceeded to annoy them further by talking loudly throughout the act. There were two patter comedians on the stage, but Marcel ignored them. He was a plump genial little man with a bald crown and dark brown glistening eyes. He looked like a comfortable family man; it would not have surprised you to discover him walking in the park with *Maman* and a grown up daughter of marriageable age for whom he had prepared an attractive *dot*. He expounded his views in a cheerful booming voice.

"Pay no attention to those elephants on the stage." He looked at the comedians with contempt. Plainly, they were not on his books. "They are distressing. They have the effrontery to imagine that they are here to make people laugh. Mr. Chantry has explained to you about the girl?"

Mike answered grimly, "Yes."

"I told him she will add something distinctive to your remarkable act. You have not misinterpreted my motives? You are both phenomenal!" Marcel gesticulated reassuringly. "But audiences look for a shapely female body, you understand? It relaxes their eyes. The girl is not expected to be clever, but to add the provocative little touch of a fine pair of breasts and nice pink limbs. And however talented you are," chuckled Marcel, "that is something the good Lord has not blessed you with!" Here he turned to answer back the rude ejaculations of some people behind him who were insisting that he be quiet. The commotion was short, but noisy. They did not quell Marcel. In an even louder voice he said to Mike and

Tino, "A low-class audience! It is not a place to which I would care to take my wife! Now permit me to tell you something about my client."

But Tino was only listening vaguely. He looked around the music-hall. Marcel hadn't been far off the truth when he described the audience as low-class. They were sturdy, but not particularly fragrant: they seemed to have come from the dingier suburbs and many sat in their caps and the smell of raw fruit was keen. But they revelled in the turn and appreciated the dismal smut with a relish that must have made the poor comedians feel that they were not entirely used-up. And they made Marcel turn with scorn when some unusually loud guffaw interrupted his flow of talk. ("Clods!" he cried. "It is a sad reflection on popular education. It is for such species as these that we artistes must provide entertainment!" Evidently, Marcel thought himself something of an artiste too.) The auditorium was decrepit. It really stank. It was obvious that it was rarely cleaned, for under his feet Tino felt the débris of some previous audience. Every now and again someone whistled, a girl gave a coy shriek, and half the audience looked round with pleasure or even stood up to see what was going on. And often—with a paralysing frankness—they told the girl or the boy exactly what to do. Tino liked them. They were lusty, they were full of a fierce animal life. Then he caught something that Mike was saying. Mike had been sitting glumly all the time, apparently ignoring Marcel rudely. Marcel must have said something at last that made him respond.

"I suppose she's the mistress of one of the Poles?"

Marcel stared. "I do not think so. They have their wives with them."

"That wouldn't stop her," said Mike tartly.

"I know the wives. They would stop the Poles. But why should she amuse herself with those flea-ridden creatures? They are not worthy of her. She is a most attractive young woman, most gratifying to the senses of our sex. *Tiens!* She could look higher than that!"

And from the glistening look in Marcel's eyes—for, in

France, booking agents are apt to expect the favours of their more attractive clients as something that goes naturally with their commission—Tino gathered that she had looked even higher than him.

"Well, we might as well tell you we don't want her," burst out Mike angrily. "You didn't do us any favour by shoving her up to Pat."

"No?" Marcel gave Mike a sly sidelong glance.

"No!"

"You will change your mind." Marcel gave a sudden wave. "Be still, my friend! The act is about to begin."

For the curtain had just come down and a great jabbering broke out in the house. At length, the orchestra struck up a new air and when the curtain rose, Tino saw that the shining steel fitments of an aerialist's act had been erected on the stage. Two men and a girl ran to the footlights. They took a bow and gestured proudly to each other. Then they began.

In a few moments, Tino realised that the turn was very poor stuff indeed. He didn't pay much attention to the girl at first, he had natural professional interest in the act and when he saw that it was clumsy and unoriginal, he turned his curiosity to her. Very quickly he had no wish to take his eyes off her. She was not clever. She had not been very well taught. Her motions were restricted to swinging prettily from the ropes, making a few amiable somersaults while her two male partners panted unhealthily on the bars. Yet she intrigued him; it was something she radiated in the most natural way in the world. What was it? Why, youth and grace, he thought. He added thoughtfully another thing: sex. She was really beautifully shaped. Her limbs were round and voluptuous, her breasts small and high. She smiled without force, as though, every bit as much as the audience, she enjoyed the act. She was very dark; Tino could not make out her features, but her hair seemed black, though in the light it sometimes caught an auburn tinge. And then it was like an aureole. Without batting an eye, she seemed to exchange a demure wink with the audience. When her figure strained through her scanty costume, it gave you a pang: it was so lissom and agog. Tino

looked stealthily at Mike, and saw that he was leaning forward, his chin resting on his hand, studying her with intense eyes. Marcel had begun to whisper to him persuadingly. He was a good agent and Tino had no doubt that he was exploiting his client's possibilities to the full. He embroidered his hisses with his expressive hands. But when Mike made a fierce gesture that as good as told him to shut up, Marcel turned to Tino and whispered with an injured air:

"An unpredictable man, your partner. He is hopeless. What has he got against the girl?"

Tino turned this over in his mind. "Well, we've got a pretty successful act. I don't know that we want anyone else pushed into it."

"That is where you are wrong." And Marcel grew intense. "For a cold English audience, it is perhaps enough. But for us on the continent? Believe me, no! We require a greater stimulation. The sex. You understand? Now look at the girl. She has something. You observe? Of course, you are a man: you have flesh and blood!" And Marcel threw a contemptuous glance at Mike and seemed about to suggest that, in this sense, the big Irishman was nothing but a freak. But he went on, "Now be good enough to turn round and look at the audience." He pressed Tino's knee urgently. "Please. I beg of you! Look at the men!" Tino turned. His glance fell on two men in the row behind him; they, too, were leaning forward; they were staring at the stage with unswerving shining eyes. Of course, they were looking at the girl. There was no desire in their stares, it was rather a warm and delectable sense of comfort, as though they were watching with pride some girl they had known from childhood, whom they would never have dreamed of touching without her consent. Marcel whispered, "You see? That is something men like. Here is no slut, no shabby courtesan," Marcel declaimed righteously, "no secondhand mistress who gets up from bed with paint caked on her face and mascara smeared all round her eyes!" (Marcel, it was obvious, wasn't without experience of such.) "She is *très gentille*. She is like Psyche, like some nymph surprised in her toilet in some woodland glade!" And, indeed, thought Tino quite oddly,

when the girl stretched up her arms in one of the silly stylised postures of her act, she had the languorous self-satisfaction Marcel was trying to portray. Marcel went on in this—as Tino thought—foolish manner for a bit, then put his mouth close to Tino's face. He had had a very pungent supper. Tino was regaled with it. He said softly, "Now try and persuade your partner. And if it is a question of dividing the commission . . . ?"

Tino grinned and nudged him, "Shut up."

At this point, Mike gave a satisfied sigh and leaned back. "Just as I thought! She's no damned good!"

The act ended. The applause was feeble when the two Poles bounded forward. But when they brought the girl to the footlights perfunctorily, the applause swelled. She stretched out her hands and kissed them. The Poles scowled. So the curtain came down.

Marcel got up and said loudly, "There is no need to wait, the rest of the bill is odious. It will only make you vomit." Pushing his way out, he exchanged good-humouredly with the people he was disturbing the last ferociously insulting remarks. When they reached the foyer, Mike said with a cool grin, "Well, she's no use to us. That's certain! Pat must have been mad."

"You are unfair," Marcel insisted.

"You shut up. I'm telling you. You're not wishing her on us."

Tino was occupied with his own thoughts. He said nothing. He was not so sure that this time Mike was right.

Then Marcel made a last despairing effort. "You will not go without speaking to her? Please! I told her to expect us." He put his hand on Mike's arm. "It will distress her terribly if we do not turn up."

"Go to hell."

Tino said softly, "Oh, let's go and see her."

Now Mike turned and levelled at him a long penetrating stare. His eyes flashed. Then he gave a laugh and a careless shrug. "All right. But make it quick."

"Come!"

Marcel led the way to the pass-door and they went backstage. They picked their path through scenery flats, foul with dust, following Marcel down a long stone corridor to the dressing-rooms. The walls dripped with moisture. A single gas jet flared inside a wire cage. Marcel knocked on a door and without pausing went in; over his back, Tino caught a glimpse of Sarah and the white shoulders of two girls, undressing; they were not put out by Marcel's entry and went on disrobing briskly. Only when Sarah, who wore a faded dressing-gown, looked at them appealingly did they gather up their clothes sullenly and go. Tino and Mike went in.

"Sarah," said Marcel kindly, "these are the gentlemen I mentioned to you." He presented Tino and Mike. He took Sarah's hand and put his lips to the palm of it. "Permit me *messieurs*, to present to you Mademoiselle Sarah Linden."

(So might some aristocrat of the old days have presented his duchess to the local tenantry. Marcel had an undeniable air!)

But Sarah laughed. It came deep from her bosom. "Go on with you," she said gaily, "whose leg are you pulling, *vieille truite* that you are!" Marcel chuckled. He had been called worse than old trout and from lips less pretty than Sarah's too. She flashed an unaffected smile at Tino and Mike. Sweeping some clothes from a prop-basket, she beckoned them to sit on it. Tino saw that her teeth were very white; her lips were rich red and soft. And during this gay exchange she had been flickering a curious look at Mike's crutch, studying his face with puzzled eyes. Now she turned to Tino and gave him, too, a long full look. Her eyes lightened as she stared at him. Mike's grim visage couldn't have been very encouraging.

"What did you think of our act?"

Marcel began fulsomely, "They thought it most interesting . . ."

But she cut him short:

"Let the gentlemen speak."

Mike, who was leaning back against the wall indolently, his crutch thrust out, said idly, "It was rotten."

"So?"

"I don't know why the hell this chap dragged us here."

Sarah looked at him from under her brows. She didn't seem to be disconcerted, though her eyes sparkled. "It's awful. I don't know how we get away with the stuff. It's all poor Yosef and Yaroslav" (these were apparently the Poles) "know." But her glance clung to Mike and there wasn't much affection in it. Then she turned to Tino.

"And what did *you* think?"

Since she seemed to be taking the situation good-humouredly Tino twinkled, "I'd have put it a bit more elegantly myself."

"But it would have meant the same?"

"Just about the same."

Now she turned back to Mike. She was blunter. "And what did you think of me?"

"You're no better than the act."

She coloured a little.

"*Monsieur n'est pas poli.*"

"I didn't come here to be polite."

"That's obvious."

"You asked me what I thought of you. I'm telling you. You're no damned good."

She tossed back her head.

"Of course, that's a matter of opinion."

"You asked for mine."

"And I got it. Only a gentleman would have expressed it with more reserve."

Offended, she glanced at Tino: seemed about to speak to him: then turned to the mirror with a brusque gesture and began to clean the make-up from her face. Marcel glared daggers at Mike. It didn't worry Mike; Tino heard him give a soft satisfied laugh.

Now Tino glanced round the room. It was brightly lit by the row of naked bulbs surrounding the mirror. It was unbearably stuffy. The floor had a tattered raffia mat; the rest was rough wooden boards. And the walls were scribbled with the telephone numbers and remarks of past occupants and drawings that were frankly rude. It was hideous. Sarah wiped the cleansing cream from her face with a stained towel. Tino saw that her skin, faintly olive, was smooth and clear, though she

still had about her somewhat high cheek-bones the angry colour Mike's remarks had induced. Now, in her dark hair, refulgent in the light of the bulbs, Tino saw that reddish tinge he had noticed on the stage; it was the sort of colouring some Celtic people have. And her hair was abundant and floated behind her in a great soft cloud. Her eyes were almost black, also with that Titian hint, but they glowed. She was a very vital person. She had a high temper, it was plain, and only her obvious high spirits and unaffected good-humour offset it when it was roused. In fact, she was beginning to twinkle again. There was a dancing affection in her eyes. She made you feel quite warm. Tino had an impulse to meet her glance in the mirror and wink at her. No, she wasn't a girl who could be angry for long. Her chin was somewhat pointed; it gave her face a Circassian air. She wouldn't have looked out of place in the flowing filmy garments of an Eastern harem—her firm figure, so youthful and promising, wouldn't, by gosh, have lost any attraction under some revealing gauze.

Tino saw that Marcel, too, was watching her. It was a benevolent, even fatherly, look: but there lurked in his eyes the reflective thoughts of a man who hasn't got anywhere first time, but wonders if it is worth trying it on with her again.

Tino grinned. Mike stirred restlessly. His crutch made a grinding sound on the boards.

"That all?" he said. He only wanted to get away.

Sarah said coolly, "I am sorry I cannot offer you a drink."

"And that's an idea," said Marcel hastily. It may be that he was beginning to see the girl's job vanishing into thin air. "Frankly, I could do with a *fine* myself."

Mike clicked his tongue and muttered irritably.

"Come," said Marcel expansively, "we will have what the nglish call a quick one! We must forget all this nonsense."

But, "No," said Sarah sharply.

"Why not?"

"I do not force my company on gentlemen who have no wish for it " She shot a cold glance at Mike. And Tino could have sworn she whispered something to Marcel. It was, "Get the monster out."

Marcel waved his hands exasperatedly.

"But we must get acquainted!"

"I can live without it," she shrugged.

Marcel looked appealingly at Tino.

"How about it?" said Tino softly. "Marcel's right. A quick one wouldn't do any of us any harm."

She seemed about to refuse. She fumbled with the litter of paint pots and mascara on the dressing-table. "You really want me to come?"

"D'you think I'm asking you because I like the sound of my voice?"

"But it's a pleasant voice."

"Then come and enjoy it."

She began to bubble.

"Very well. You are kind."

"You could start with a smile."

"Why?"

"If you want to know, it improves the shape of your face."

"Well, that's something!"

And with her white teeth flashing, her laughter burst out. Mike's face was black. She said with dignity, fingering the cord of her dressing-gown, "Please wait for me outside. I don't think your friend is the type who finds much glamour in watching a lady dress." It was as good as a poke of her tongue at Mike. His eyes glittered. They went out, listening to her suppressed ripple of amusement as they closed the door.

Mike turned on Tino.

"What the hell's all this! We don't want her!"

Tino said coolly, "Politeness doesn't cost anything. You're behaving like a bear with a sore head."

They heard her singing lightly within. Marcel volunteered only one more comment: he was beginning to look smug and hopeful again.

"She is very vivacious. Don't you find her so? Like a pool of delicious water in which one wishes to plunge oneself!" Then, meeting Tino's eye, he said hastily, "But do not misinterpret me. I do not mean it in any ungentlemanly sense."

(No, by jiminy! Just give him the chance!)

Soon, Sarah came out. She had piled her hair high on her head. There was little make-up on her face; she had perhaps accentuated her lips. She wore a light coat slung loosely from her shoulders. It was pathetically threadbare, but she carried it with an air. In her clothes she looked slim and delicate. As they moved down the dingy corridor, her high heels pattered on the stone. Tino found that her warm arm had slipped itself in a comradely way through his.

Marcel hailed a taxi. Mike had nothing to say when they were inside, but his face was set. They drove in silence. Only Sarah, glancing at Mike just once or twice, hummed carelessly under her breath. They pulled up at a *bistro*. Marcel paid off the taxi and led the way in.

It was a low room, hot and smoky. Little knots of patrons sat drinking at the long zinc-covered bar. There were a few stained tables, divided by cubicles, all packed. Many garish advertisements of *aperitifs* met the eye. Behind the bar leaned a *garçon*, chatting with his patrons; he wore a long dun-coloured apron and though he had on no collar, you saw where the stud had marked his throat. He seemed to know Marcel for he nodded to him cheerfully, then sauntered across. The four had sat themselves on stools at the bar.

Marcel ordered Dubonnets. The *garçon* served them. They drank.

"*A bonne santé*." Marcel smacked his lips. He loved to air his English. "Mud in your eye!" Sarah had placed herself between Tino and Marcel. Grimly silent, Mike sat on the outside of the group.

At the far end of the bar an accordionist played softly. There was a little space and a few couples danced.

Interestedly, Sarah said to Tino, "Do you like this circus life?"

"Very much."

"I have never worked in one. It would be a great novelty, at least." She bent her head to give Tino a sly look. "Marcel tells me you are passionately anxious to have me in your act." This, of course, was intended for Mike. His glass rattled fretfully on the bar.

Tino suppressed a laugh.

"You don't want to believe everything Marcel says."

"But seriously, do you think I am so very bad?"

"No."

"They tell me I have great charm." She held up her profile demurely as she said this.

"If I told mademoiselle just what she *has* got, she'd think me very bold."

This made her giggle. "*Oh, la, la!* You hear that, Marcel?" And she leaned forward to address Mike. "You hear that, you with the sour face down there—you hear what your friend has to say?"

"He's a damned fool."

"No. Your friend——" She paused to look Tino mildly in the face. "What is your first name?"

"Tino."

"Tino? You may call me Sarah."

"Sarah."

And she went on addressing Mike. "Tino is no fool. He knows. Heavens above, I'm no genius, but I have *some* skill! And, of course, I have something else besides."

Now her eyes gleamed. Provocatively, she put out the tip of her little pink tongue. She called to the *garçon*:

"Pierre, come here."

He came over. Evidently he knew her, for he gave her a friendly smile.

"Pierre, have you been to the music-hall this week?"

"But naturally."

"What did you think of me?"

"I thought you were ravishing."

"Why?"

The *garçon* looked at her with his head on a side. Then he answered gravely, "When you get to heaven, maybe the good Lord will tell you. All I can say is this: you gave me the most pleasurable *frissons* down my spine."

(By *frissons* he inferred, in his simple way, the keenest of all ecstasies that comes from sexual congress; so Marcel hastened to add a little professional dignity to it. "Pierre exaggerates!

Go back to your customers, man!" Marcel seemed strangely displeased; he glared at the *garçon*. It sprang suddenly to Tino's mind that there was some elemental jealousy in this.)

Then Marcel lowered his voice. "But he has the right idea. There is no need to labour it. We get his point." He waved the *garçon* away. And with this sally, Sarah was content. She was smiling softly, watching, in the fly-blown mirror ahead, Mike staring at her with narrowed eyes. She finished her drink, turning brightly to Tino.

"Do you like to dance?"

"Yes."

"Is it necessary for me to press you?"

He had to chuckle.

"I wouldn't put it past you. Come on."

She slipped off her coat, revealing herself in a modest black dress. She walked ahead of Tino gracefully and he noted approvingly the clean lines of her hips and thighs as they swept beneath the clinging silk. She whispered something to the accordionist. He smiled and changed the tune.

"I like a waltz. I do not care for these hot steps, *à la Americaine*."

Not more than half a dozen couples were on the floor, dancing very close to each other, the men with a masculine exultance, in their tight coats and narrow trousers, the women with a sinuous abandon to the tune. Sarah was very light. But for the warm touch of her, Tino would scarcely have known she was in his arms. She gave herself with pleasure to the music, humming absently all the time. There was a perfume about her that was faint, but pleasing; it had a slight headiness like wine.

At length, with some tiny surprise in her dark eyes, she said, "You dance very well!"

"You're not so bad yourself."

"I?" She made a simple gesture. "Oh, I once worked in a cabaret. It's such a change to dance for enjoyment alone." Then she pushed back her head to stare at him gravely. "Are they all like you in this circus of yours?"

"How d'you mean, like me?"

"Well-favoured."

He looked at her quizzically.

"Come off it. Where d'you think it's going to get you, soft-soaping me?"

She giggled. Then she must have caught sight of Mike, for she cried, "But I detest your friend! He's *gauche*!"

"Oh, it's just his way."

"He's unpleasant. If we are to work together, is that a way to speak to me? No! He doesn't want me! Why?"

"He thinks our act's all right as it is."

"And you? Do you want me?"

Tino answered uncomfortably, "If it's going to cause trouble between Mike and me, well, no, I don't."

"You're very close to him?"

"We're partners. We get along fine."

Again her dark eyes stole up. "You are honest, anyway. And you are nice. I suppose you have been told that you are very handsome, too?"

"I know I don't crack my mirror when I look at it."

"Comedian!" she laughed. Then she looked again at Mike and brooded. "Well, I don't know. I shall have to think about it. To work with that creature, that ruffian—no! I don't think I could put up with it. He would make me ill."

With this she seemed to put Mike out of her mind, for she slipped her head on Tino's shoulder and gave herself to the music. She danced now like the rest of the women with their men, very close to Tino. It was utterly without sensuousness; it was a free and gratifying gesture, she liked to dance, and particularly she liked to dance with the man who held her now. He felt her body, moving with such an effortless lilt against him, and he decided that the sensation was by no means unpleasant. He smiled down at her hair and, like her, thought of nothing but the rhythm and the steps.

The music ended. She took his fingers and led him back to the bar.

"I am tired. It's no joy-ride at the music-hall. I am only a working girl, you know."

Marcel had presumably been talking continuously to Mike,

for his voice was hoarse and more empty Dubonnet glasses stood on the bar. Mike was barely listening. He had simply shut Marcel and his babblings out of his consciousness as one closes a window on the buzzings of some insects outside. It was dawning only now on Marcel that he might just as well have saved his vocal cords. He gave Tino a comical glance of despair.

Sarah said simply, "Marcel, I must go."

"Very well."

"Ready, Mike?" Tino touched his arm.

Mike found his crutch and rose. Marcel threw down some coins for the *garçon*, who looked up and nodded pleasantly to Sarah, "*A bientôt*."

They went outside. As they came into the cool night air, it was like a draught of fresh water after the cloying smells of the bar. Marcel took Sarah's arm and began, "Sarah, I will see you home . . ."

But she laughed gently and held up her hand. "Now, Marcel. You know you're a very amorous man, and besides wasting your time it would only worry your wife." She kissed her finger-tips to him. Then she put her soft hand in Tino's. "Good night, Tino."

"Good night, Sarah."

"Perhaps—who knows?" As for Mike, she just threw a dark look at him and shrugged. She turned and went. They stood watching her going down the street under the lamps, listening to her heels pattering, until she disappeared into the night.

When Tino turned to Marcel it was to see a strangely baffled look on his face.

Marcel began abruptly, "She is remarkable. I will not deny that when she was last in Marseilles I offered her a comfortable flat and——" He lifted his shoulders helplessly. "But that is an old story. The kernel of the nut is that she refused me. Why? I don't know. She defeats me! She is simply made for love!"

"Where does she come from?" asked Tino curiously.

"Paris. She was born of an English father and a French mother. That is why she has that English name: Linden. But she

was brought up in France. She has no relations. She lives alone."

Then Marcel came out with this highly emotional thing:

"If I did not see that great capacity for affection—the warm and wonderful love that lives inside that body of hers—*mon dieu*, I would be tempted to say that she is a virgin! And who knows? Perhaps she is!"

Mike jeered, "And p'raps pigs can fly."

"Confess to yourself. She's intriguing."

Mike interposed harshly.

"I know what she is: smart."

And he turned and stalked off down the street.

Now Marcel seized hold of Tino's sleeve and whispered hurriedly, "After what that stupid creature said to her, I will have my work cut out to get her to join your act. But I will not despair. No! Only talk to that grotesque." (Grotesque! Mike would have enjoyed that.) "Tell him she is a find. Tell him she will be wonderful! And remember that if it is a question of a little commission . . ."

"Good night," grinned Tino. He tugged free his sleeve and hurried off after Mike.

They travelled back to the circus on a bus that was empty but for them: it was the last run of the night and the conductor yawned behind. Mike was silent until they neared the pitch: then he turned and said frigidly, "What was the big idea?"

"What big idea?"

"Leading her up the garden. What was the sense in getting pally with her?"

"She wasn't so bad. I don't know why you had to hurt her feelings."

"We've got no use for her. I told you, didn't I? Don't go against me again. We're enough for each other. Just you remember that."

With this, the bus stopped; they climbed out and Mike, not uttering another word, lunged on ahead, disappearing towards the glowing windows of the caravans.

Tino went off to have a chat with Beppo and Louie. When he came back to the caravan, Mike was asleep.

. . . . .

Probably Pat Chantry was waiting for Mike to come to him and tell him what he thought of the girl. He made no move to approach Mike until the middle of the afternoon, then, somewhat tetchily, he called Mike and Tino into his trailer.

"Well?" he addressed Mike. "What did you think of the girl I asked you to see?"

"It was a lousy music-hall."

It was clear to Pat now that he was going to have trouble with Mike.

"I wasn't thinking of buying it."

"You astonish me. It was a lousy turn. The girl was lousy, too."

Pat pursed his lips.

"You're in a sweet humour, aren't you?"

"You don't have to put up with it."

"And what the hell d'you mean by that?"

Tino muttered; the sudden palpitant tension bewildered him; it must have required some effort of Pat to collect himself. He looked grimly at Mike.

"I don't know why you say that about the girl. I thought she was rather sweet."

Mike laughed.

"Well, I dare say you can get what you want without having to give her a job."

Now this was a false move, and even Tino was shocked by the foolishness of the remark. It came to him then that Mike, full of suppressed resentment, was in a pretty reckless state. Pat's blue eyes had gone ice-cold.

He said softly, "Mike, watch your tongue. I've chucked men out for less."

Mike made a curt gesture. His face was white.

"Is that all you want to say to me?"

"What's your objection to taking the girl into the act?"

"She's no good to us."

"Well, I differ."

"You wouldn't have to work with her."

"I have to run this circus. And I know what's best for it."

Pat sat back. He scrutinised Mike through half-closed eyes.

"You're an odd sort of card. I wonder what the devil goes on in your mind. The way you talk, you've got it in for her good and proper. And you don't even know her. She'd work up a smart routine on the side with Tino to mix in with your comedy stuff, young chap and girl, why, it's nice—show off the act much better too." His glance ran over Mike strangely. "You just don't make sense."

Then he turned abruptly to Tino.

"What did you think of her?"

Tino sighed. It wasn't going to be easy to say.

"Go on," said Mike harshly. "You've got a tongue."

"Well, Mike, I think for once you're wrong. I've always felt a bit lonely doing my stuff myself. You make people laugh—it'd be a change to switch their minds to a couple like us, just nice to look at, you know; doing business that's so different from yours. A girl wouldn't be a bad idea."

"You're crazy."

"Not this time, Mike."

Mike shook his head; and then began again with a savage despair: "See here, I could take you to another management who wouldn't wish this kind of thing on us. To hell with Pat." He jeered at Pat's glowering face. "We could walk out on him. He knows it too. You come with me and I'll show you the world the way you've never seen it before!" Then he stopped. He stared into Tino's face. He knew what he saw. He laughed, "But not without Judith, eh?"

Tino half got up. He was getting sick of this.

"All right, Mike. If you feel like that, Pat won't mind dropping the idea."

But Pat said coolly, "I would. I'd mind very much."

Mike burst out, "What's she got that I haven't got?"

Now Pat paused. Then he lifted his eyes to Mike and mildly, yet not without a cruel rancour, said, "Well, if you must know, youth. Just youth and grace."

Mike strained his eyes back at him. His face, so white, had suddenly gone red; there was a film of sweat on it. He laughed queerly—very nearly pathetically, it seemed to Tino: "Well, that's something I haven't got. I'm no matinée idol, I know."

He turned to stare at Tino. "What do you say? Take her?"

"We could try. Throw her out if she's no good. Pat knows that's only fair."

"Oh, Christ. We've got along together grand. I like you. You know that. Well, please yourself."

Pat rose.

"I'll turn it over in my mind."

"You know what I think, anyway."

"Yes, Mike. You've had your say. I'll give it a lot of thought."

The two went out. Crossing the field, putting his hand on Mike's arm, Tino said, "Mike, I had to tell him the truth."

Mike pushed him away wearily.

"Why didn't you face it out with me? What's done is done."

And since Mike seemed to have no further inclination for his company, Tino went into the tent. He soon forgot the whole business watching Rosa practising her stallion in the ring. Rosa, so round and Slavic, in tight slacks that made her hips bulk plumply, trod with an effortless balance on the back of her white Lippizan as it pounded round the ring. Judith was there. Presently Rosa shouted to Tino:

"What's your Mike going about with a face like the devil for?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"And have my eye blacked? Give such advice to your enemies, my friend!"

"He's in a mood."

"But a bad one!"

"Shall I tell him you're worried?"

"Worried?" Rosa laughed scornfully. "For my part, he could——" What Mike could do, and presumably it was virulent, was lost in her coarse mutter and the thudding of the horse's hooves in the sand. Then, to escape Rosa, Tino moved with Judith to the tent flap. There, dazzled by the bright sun, she gave him a hesitant look. "Dad's in a state."

"It'll pass."

"Mike's such a fool to needle him about the girl."

"What girl? Speak!"

It was Rosa. She had slid down and come up behind them. Her sharp ears had caught their words.

"Now, Rosa," said Tino firmly. "Nothing for you to gossip about."

"I shall gossip in any case, so it will be safer to let me know the truth."

"Just a girl Pat thought we might take into the act."

"And she's coming?"

"I doubt it."

Rosa stared thinly across the sunlit field; in the distance they could make out the still figure of Mike sitting on the caravan steps. There was a mocking smile on her face.

"So that's it!"

Judith said, "Honestly, I can't make him out."

But Rosa gave her a strange contemptuous look.

"Can you not? I can. He is an odd man, but to me he is transparently clear. He abhors our sex. And why? Because we imprison him. He is a sensual and arrogant man. That is why he touches my Russian heart. He walks with his head in the sky, telling himself he is master of his soul—dependent on none! Then, of a sudden, it comes over him that he is only a creature of his desires. He is no longer a king, he is a slave—he tries to fight it, but he can no longer control himself: he must seek a woman to relieve him and like a madman, hating her, he finds some vile creature and purges himself of his sex. But how he detests her when at last he is free! She has reminded him that his feet are of clay. Brute that he is—I know what goes on in his heart and I can feel sorry for him." And, indeed, Rosa's face was moved. "A woman in his act? It would fill him with rage." Now Rosa laughed shortly. Tino and Judith were staring at her curiously. "If this girl is sensible, she'll stay where she is! I would not be in her shoes if she gets on the wrong side of Mike."

And Rosa clicked her tongue to her Lippizan, sprang to its back and, with a Russian whoop, went prancing care-

lessly round the ring. Judith went. For some little time, Tino stood just staring at Mike.

That night, the tent was full. They had expected a good audience—they knew the word had gone around—and ten minutes before the opening fanfare there wasn't an empty seat left. By the time Tino and Mike were up on the pedestal for their act, something electric had come into the tent. Even Mike was moved by the furore of the applause. He grinned at Tino as, breathlessly, after the finale, both slid down to the ground. Then, reaching the darkness of the gangway, Tino turned. Someone had touched his arm.

"Tino."

It was Sarah. She wore the same light coat she had had on last night but a silk scarf added a gay touch of colour to her throat. Her eyes shone in the dazzle of the limes. He stared at her in astonishment.

"What are you doing here?"

Now Mike saw her; his mouth opened, then tightened harshly; he brushed past her and hurried on.

She laughed demurely, "You might at least say you're pleased to see me."

"Aren't you on at the music-hall?"

"Oh, Mr. Chantry sent for me. And I so wanted to see your act. It's marvellous."

He nodded, at a loss. She darted a look after Mike.

"Yes, the beast's clever. I must say that for him. I shall have to try very hard to be good enough for you."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Isn't it clear?" Her eyes danced. "Mr. Chantry's taken me on."

"To go in with us?"

"What else?"

"Well, I'll be damned!" He shook his head with a helpless laugh. "You don't know what you're taking on."

"Oh, you'll help me. It was only because you were so nice that I changed my mind. As for that ogre"—again looking after Mike—"I'm not frightened of him. I've dealt with

worse." Then she looked Tino up and down artlessly. It was a friendly, uninhibited stare. "You're as handsome with your clothes off as on."

"Looks as though you're going to have lots of chances to see me that way."

And he left her. Perplexed, he had to chuckle. He really didn't know what to say. Judith was at the far end of the gangway. She gestured to him curiously.

"Is that the girl?"

"Yes."

"What's her name?"

"Sarah."

"She looks nice."

"She's a type. By God," he shrugged, "that'll be a flea in Mike's ear!" He slipped an arm around Judith's waist. Startlingly, she blushed. "Are you going to give me supper?"

"Of course."

"I want to keep clear of Mike." He laughed ruefully. "He won't be fit to talk to when he hears!"

III

That night, Tino returned to the caravan as late as he could. He expected an eruption and he half-hoped to escape it by giving Mike a chance to get to sleep. But if Mike was in bed, he wasn't sleeping; the caravan was thick with smoke. Mike must have been lighting one cigarette from another, for by his side a saucer was piled with butts. He looked up as Tino came in, fastened his sharp eyes on him fleetingly but said nothing: nothing. And now and again—as the cigarettes rasped his lungs—he shook with his soft smoker's cough. His body seemed gaunt under the sheet. A lot of Mike's arrogance fled from him in bed. His hair glowed with a boyish heat against the whiteness of the pillow; and bereft of his crutch, which stood in the corner, he took on a helplessness that could be disturbing. Tino watched him covertly. He thought it better to say something. What he didn't know was how safely to begin.

He climbed into bed. He said bluntly, "Mike."

"Yes, Tino?"

"You saw her, didn't you?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Sarah. Come on, let's have it out."

Mike crushed the last cigarette and prepared for sleep. Expressionlessly, he replied:

"I saw her."

"Well, you can guess what's happened."

"I'm nobody's fool. She's coming, is she?"

Tino nodded.

"Well, that's all there is to it, isn't there. No use making a song about spilt milk."

Tino looked puzzled.

"You're taking it pretty quietly, Mike."

Mike almost chuckled.

"I don't know that smashing up the caravan's going to do a lot of good."

"But it lets off an awful lot of steam." Tino lay back. Feeling easier, he sighed. "You don't mind, then?"

Mike turned his head to look at Tino. For a moment his eyes gleamed; he had that satyr's look again. "Did I say so? I do mind. I mind like hell."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go to sleep, of course. And mind my own business. Good night."

And Mike blew out the lamp. Tino heard his body creak the bunk; heard him sigh; then silence. Disturbed all over again, Tino lay awake.

It was obvious that Mike wasn't going to give anyone the pleasure of seeing him seething under the affront. The story would soon get round the camp and, because they were afraid of him, the artistes would giggle over it and gossip—by God, it would get more and more outrageous as it went from mouth to mouth. And it would end up as a shining example of how Pat Chantry had put his foot down and brought the big crippled Irishman to heel. (Which, of course, he had! Pat must have been pretty needled to have engaged the girl that very same

night.) But Mike's composure would be the same. It might be that his face would go a little gaunter, there would be a tighter line about his mouth; but his fury wouldn't be the less disconcerting because it was repressed within. Poor Mike! It was such an abominable slap in the face! Tino wished he'd come down on his side against Pat and swallowed his personal views: Pat wouldn't have been so disposed to fight a united front. Now it was too late. They had the girl. Tino wondered wryly just what else they had got.

And so, by a natural process, his thoughts flitted to Sarah and he smiled reminiscently into the dark. Eh? She made him laugh. As affectionate as a kitten. Really, she wouldn't be bad fun in a partnership that started off on the right foot! He saw for a moment her dark eyes that danced so easily to frank laughter, the crinkled corners of her large, but well-shaped, mouth: he thought with some mild surprise that it might be pleasant to kiss it: fleetingly, as he dropped off, he felt again the unexpected warmth of her arm in his as they moved down the vile dressing-room corridor of the music-hall, heard again the delicate patter of her high heels on the stone. Probably not a bean in the world—but chic! And she sent *frissons* (engaging word!) down the spines of simple men like the *garçon*, Pierre, who knew what it was they looked for in a girl. It was his last waking thought. With this, he fell asleep.

He woke once in the night and fancied vaguely that he heard Mike stir; he sat up and saw the red glow of another of his cigarettes in the dark.

"Mike?"

"Go to sleep."

"Why're you awake?"

"My leg aches. Go back to sleep. I'm quite all right."

Mike's face was hollower in the morning, but his manner was quiet. It may have been that Tino was over-alert and sensitive this morning—(and why? the sun shone out of a perfect cloudless sky, the meadow glittered with dew and the caravan kids were romping with shrill cries of glee!)—yet Tino couldn't put down a little thrill of unease. Mike's pale eyes were dim. A cigarette that had long since gone out hung limply from the

corner of his mouth. As they washed in the warmth of the sun, on the caravan steps, Tino looked thoughtfully at Mike's thin yet sinewy body; emaciated, almost, it suggested nevertheless endurance and strength. You were a fool if you let that cragginess deceive you. You had only to see him up on his wire to know what violent efforts he was capable of. His skin was very smooth, with the creamy pallor associated with his gingery colouring. You would have expected a rich pelt on his cavernous chest; but it was as hairless as an adolescent boy's. He was very clean. He washed interminably. He combed his thick red hair and slipped his shirt over his head. Now Tino saw that his hands shook. He couldn't have slept very much; it had horrified Tino when he woke to see the mound of crushed cigarette butts in the saucer by his side. He was roused by Mike's ironical grin.

"Know me next time, Tino?"

"Was I staring?"

"Practically pop-eyed."

Then, in a rush, Tino felt immeasurably sorry for the man. So damn silly! They'd have to get rid of the girl. He and Mike got along much too well to let some skirt from a music-hall damage their association, like this. "Mike," he began earnestly, "I've got an idea . . ."

"If it's about Sarah" (the first time Mike had ever used her name—he hesitated at it), "put it away. I'm bored to death with her."

And he slipped his arm affectionately inside Tino's.

"I'm starving. Come on! Let's eat!"

Most of the artistes had their meals in a communal tent. The married ones preferred to cook *en famille* in their caravans —but for the rest it was more economical to eat together; and when Tino and Mike came in, the trestle table was full. They crushed their way to their seats. They all ate voraciously. You would never have expected little men like Beppo and Louie, the clowns, to put away such extraordinary quantities of food and scalding deep-brown tea; and even the Orientals, the three Jap brothers who did the springboard act, with their spare dapper bodies, fed with a gusto that was cheerful to see.

And what with the clatter of tin plates and spoons and the cackling ingenuous laughter of the clowns, the racket was indescribable. Then, all of a sudden, it dimmed: a little silence hung, as if a blanket had been swathed over the table, muffling all sound. Tino, eating busily, looked up surprised. He saw that most eyes were fixed on Mike; and that Louie had apparently said something to make them stiffen with sly anticipation. Tino stared. Louie caught his glance. He grinned feebly. Whatever joke he had cracked about Mike, he was obviously not very keen to follow it up.

"Well, it's a fact," he said. He couldn't, for pride's sake, drop it now. And Louie was emboldened because Mike hadn't even bothered to look up; he was scooping at his porridge as if he were utterly alone in the tent. Nobody but Mike could go so remote in the midst of a crowd. "Ask Mike! Everybody knows Pat's gone and done him in the eye!"

Chang, the tiger-trainer, chuckled. "Watch your tongue, Louie, or the Irishman'll do something pretty to your eye too."

"It's true." Louie showed bravado. He didn't like Mike. As long as it was safe, he never objected to a furtive dig at him —as he might have poked a stick at an animal through the bars of the cage. Now Louie stared at him maliciously. He calculated nicely that it was worth the risk. He sniggered, "Mike's cracking up. Pat wants a nice girl to put a bit of guts into the act."

Tino said mildly, "Your breakfast's making you rattle."

"Stick up for him if you want to."

"I don't know about other people cracking up, but if they took the wig and baggy trousers off you you'd fall apart. Get on with your food."

And at this, Louie caught the warning glint in Tino's eye: he was nervous. Mike had not for an instant lifted his eyes from his plate. In a spurt of naïve rage, Louie said, "Oh, I'm just a clown! But Mike's a star. It's a come-down for him."

"Shut up."

Chang yawned lazily. "Something in what Louie says."

"Of course!" Chang's vague patronage bolstered up Louie's

fluttering courage. "She's a smart bit, too! She'll soon have Mike jumping through hoops."

Louie should have left it at that. Tino muttered, "Louie." (Mad! Mad! Baiting Mike like that!) He saw the spoon in Mike's hand gripped so that the knuckles shone. One of the Japs got up and left the table. His brothers followed. They hated violence. Here, they sensed it in the air. Rosa leaned forward warningly and tapped Louie's arm. "Enough's enough."

Chang took a hand. "Let him talk."

"Mind your own business."

"You're sweet on peg-leg. I'm not." Chang stretched: he was a huge man, the muscles seemed to leap under his thin shirt. His brown skin shone; he wore, in his effeminate way, the gay silk bandeau about his coarse black hair. But he had the overweening confidence of his gigantic bulk; and his small dark eyes glittered malignantly at Mike. "Louie's right. We'll have some fun when that girl turns up. We'll soon see who's going to wear the pants in Mike's little act."

Mike sat up.

He whispered, "Get out."

"I don't take orders from you."

"Get out. Get out."

Mike half rose, supporting himself on his knee on the form. He swung back his crutch gently. It seemed to Tino that his eyes were mad. "I swear I'll kill you if you don't clear out."

Chang got up angrily. He stared into Mike's face. It may have been that he was appalled by the craziness of Mike's expression, for he paused. He ran his glance around the faces of the company. His eyes fell. He shrugged and swaggered out of the tent.

Rosa kicked Louie under the table. He was quite white. He, too, got up and hurried out.

"Fine happy family," laughed Rosa. She was watching Mike uneasily all the time. Tino put his hand on Mike's arm; felt it shiver as he sat. He went on with his food.

As they left the tent when they had finished, Tino said to Mike, "You nearly started something then. What the hell would you have done if he'd refused to go?"

"Smashed his head in."

Tino laughed deprecatingly.

"Talking big!"

But when he looked into Mike's cool face, a little thrill of horror shot through him. The big Irishman meant every word. He might easily have crushed in Chang's skull like an eggshell if the tiger-trainer hadn't gone while the going was good.

Later, Rosa got hold of Tino. She said angrily, "Why did you let it happen?"

"What?"

"The girl. You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't exactly run this circus."

"Oh, you're mad! Haven't you been with Mike long enough to know how he feels about such things?"

"Then why don't you go and talk to Pat?"

She shrugged moodily. She stared glumly across the field.

"He'd tell me to mind my own business."

Tino chuckled.

"And come to think of it, that's what Mike'd tell you too."

"But you'll see. You'll regret it."

"Mike'll simmer down."

She gave a short laugh.

"You think so? How can you be so foolish? You don't know your partner at all. I do. I am a Russian. I have an instinct about him." (It was on the tip of Tino's tongue to tell her that, Russian or not, she had other things besides instincts where Mike was concerned—she could be jealous too. But her dour face told him he had better not.) She finished, "Someone should tell that girl to watch her step. You warn her! D'you hear? I wouldn't put it past that crazy Irishman to do to her what he nearly did to Chang before!"

The following day, Sarah arrived. They had not expected her till the week-end, but because her Polish ex-partners were being difficult she decided to end her connection with them quickly before they worked themselves up to a dangerous pitch.

"They're like babies," she told Tino. "Of course, I told them

it was no use, but they just swore at me and wept. They screamed. They said they only got their bookings through me. Oh, I had no respect left for them when they behaved like that! Then their wives threatened to pull out my hair. I have pretty hair, don't you think? It would have been a pity to leave my poor tresses in their fists." She twinkled demurely. "I just packed my things and fled."

She was put in with Rosa to share her caravan. At first, Rosa flew up in arms. But when Sarah came across with her bags she stared at her sullenly, then abruptly seemed to change her mind. Was the girl different from what she had pictured? Probably it was as simple as this: it was difficult to resist Sarah when she smiled at you. Rosa just pointed to the spare bunk and muttered, then sat by herself on the caravan steps. In two minutes she was back inside, helping Sarah unpack.

"Why? I thought to myself at first, I won't have a trouble-maker in with me. Some little French slut!" ("Half English," Tino reminded her. "Why, that's even worse!" Rosa indignantly cried.) "But when those big dark eyes of hers went soft in my face—I won't deny that my heart gave a turn. And I'm a lonely woman, if I can't have a decent man in my caravan, a nice girl's the next best thing. Now I'll have someone to gossip with when I go to bed each night!"

For the very first day, Sarah did little but get acquainted with the camp. The artistes were spare with their welcome. They were cautious with strangers, particularly those who hadn't been bred and born in circus life. She was from a music-hall? It was no recommendation, they shrugged. So they summed her up narrowly over the meals. It was Beppo who started the thaw. He sat next to her. She must have been whispering some story to him of her experiences with the Poles, for suddenly he slapped his thighs, gave a yelp of laughter and choked on his food. But in the meantime, the other artistes were agog, grinning at Sarah and growing interested. Beppo had started off a mood. Now she had all their ears, and with the most ingenuous face in the world recounted an incident at the music-hall between the Poles and their wives that was so outrageous that even Tino stopped eating and just stared at

her. He was startled; like the rest of them, he too had to throw back his head and roar. Of course, what gave her story so much point was the innocent manner in which she retailed it; her lips were so soft and pretty, it was incredible to believe she'd quite understood what they'd said. But she understood all right. You could see the bubble at the back of her eyes. With their contempt for music-halls, it was just the sort of thing the artistes enjoyed. She had a fund of the tales. Tino listened keenly. Really, she'd lived a remarkable life! Orphaned when she was very young, she had worked in the chorus line. ("I was fifteen, *messieurs*. Fifteen! Oh, believe me, I learned a lot!") Then she'd toured the cheaper circuits. ("And they were an eye-opener! A girl had to have a head on her shoulders to preserve her virtue amongst wolves like that!") In this way, she had graduated to the Gaietés Montparnasses and the Folies Bergère. She had been a show girl for years. Beppo cried, "You must have been ravishing to look at." He winked.

"And why?"

"Well——!" Beppo pantomimed that, presuming her to have been glamorously undressed, he wouldn't have been able to take his eyes off her.

She turned a soft look on him. "But that's where you are wrong. Undressed, one girl is very much like another. It is the way she wears clothes that gives her the only personality she has. A naked girl is nothing. We all have what God gave us. *N'est ce pas?* It is the fine feathers she has on that makes her chic!"

And yet never was there the slightest suggestion that she'd led a dubious life. It didn't even enter your mind that she'd escaped from that sordid backstage career anything but unscathed. When she tossed back her hair and pealed out, her white teeth gleaming, her manner was so frank and enchanting, why, you felt that if anyone made a pass at her, she had only to smile artlessly into his face to make him feel an utter fool. Yet it was obvious that the men in the tent found her desirable. What was her secret? It was as Marcel had put it: she was like a pool of delicious water, even the grossest of men would hesitate before sullying it. Tino said nothing. He listened with a grin.

"Well, naturally, there are some things one has to keep to oneself. It's understandable, in my life, a poor girl sometimes gets into a predicament she has to fight her way out of. And no matter how hard you fight, you can't always win." She twinkled. "Do you want to hear?"

"No, I don't!"

"That's what I mean. But I'm not a bad girl. Truly. Just lucky."

And she put her hand in his in the friendliest way and tripped with him across the field. When they got to the Big Top, she paused. "When are we going to start work?"

"I'll have to see Mike. We've got to build up a routine to fit into the act."

She made a face. "We don't want him. We can do that ourselves. He'll only ruin my style with his ugly looks."

"You'll do as you're told. I'm asking Mike."

But when, later in the afternoon, he spoke to him about it, Mike merely shrugged disinterestedly. "What the hell do I care? It's you she'll do most of her stuff with. You work it out. It's got nothing to do with me." Then he added gruffly, "But keep it simple. She's not pulling any wool over my eyes. She's no damned good. You see that she doesn't muck up the act trying to show off." He smiled crookedly. "Not that it'd worry me if she got too clever and broke her blasted neck."

"Oh, Mike."

"You heard. She's your pigeon. You sort it out with her."

Tino commenced with her that very same day. She had stripped to tights and vest and had wrapped a thin scarf around her hair. She looked serious and efficient; and first he sent her up and let her swing for a little on the bars. He was not sure if she had a head for heights, it was one thing working on a cramped theatre stage and another working up in the dome of a tent. But he soon noted appreciatively that she seemed to feel at home. She wasn't troubled by the sense of vast empty spaces, nor by the fact that the safety net below wasn't of any reassuring size. Continental audiences frowned on safety nets; they felt that it robbed an aerial act of a most

vital thrill, that of seeing an artiste not only displaying his skill but gambling provocatively with his neck. Later, Tino went up with her and they swung together while he gauged her sense of rhythm. She hadn't a nerve in her body. She was hardly breathless and her face was earnest and keen. She wanted to get on with the more ambitious leaps, but he told her: no hurry, one stage at a time.

"You don't want to make a fool of yourself in front of a big crowd."

She cried with horror, "Tino, how can you even imagine it?"

He grinned.

"Just you miss my hands and go bouncing on that net. You'll want to die when they give you the bird."

But later, when they came down to the ground, wiping their shining eyes, she was panting with excitement,

"I'm going to be a model pupil, you'll see!"

"You're too damned cocky."

"I?" She tucked his arm tightly in hers with an affectionate hug. "You've got me all wrong, *chéri*. Just nice and happy, that's me!"

Pat Chantry knew that they had begun to work. He took Tino aside and asked keenly, "Well? How d'you think she's going to shape?"

"Oh, all right."

"Easy to work with?"

Tino repressed a desire to chuckle that she was a bit of a handful and only said, "She's forward, but it's no harm. Better if she's enthusiastic. We'll keep her in hand."

"Fine. After all, I don't expect her to turn out a star. That wasn't what I hired her for. She's got something else, you know what, and it's all I want the customers to see." Pat's eyes glittered contemptuously. "That fool, Mike! I'll show him! We'll make him eat his words."

And, now that they had made a start, each morning Tino and Sarah practised hard. They began soon after breakfast when they were likely to have the tent to themselves. She may have guessed that he was throwing his heart into her training; after a strenuous evening's performance he felt achingly the

strain of the long morning's work. She showed her gratitude by listening attentively, watching him demonstrate the routine he was building up for them with ardent eyes. And she repaid his efforts handsomely. She came on apace. By the end of the second week, Tino didn't see why they shouldn't take a risk on her first appearance. Pat, who came in often to watch them, agreed. He rubbed his hands with glee.

"We'll put her on Saturday night."

"I'll ask Mike."

Pat glowered. "You've done a good job on her. The hell with Mike!"

But later that same morning—when both he and Sarah had done about as much as bone and muscle could stand—Tino looked down from the pedestal and saw Mike sitting silently amidst the seats below. He must have been there some time; he was leaning forward intently, resting his chin on his crutch. Tino slid down. He beckoned to Sarah that it was enough. He went up to Mike, his face shining with sweat, and dropped into a seat by his side.

"Well, Mike? What do you think?"

"She'll do

Sarah had come up. She heard it. It seemed to please her. She flushed.

"That's quite a compliment, coming from you."

Mike looked at her quizzically.

"I don't know why you should say that. It's no such thing. You'll just about get by. Tino's clever. He's gone about it the right way to cover you up."

Tino was irritated. It seemed a poor return for so much work.

"That isn't true."

Mike smiled lazily.

"Never mind. I don't suppose anyone cares."

Sarah stared into Mike's face. Around her mouth the skin was white and tense. She made a great effort: and in a low voice said, "What have you got against me, Mike?"

"You flatter yourself. I don't give you that much thought."

"We don't have to go on like this, making ourselves

uncomfortable. I swear to you, I don't know what to do!"

"I could tell you."

"Go away?"

"You said it."

She burst out, "How can you be like that! I've never done you any harm. You're persecuting me. I don't understand you at all."

Mike laughed mockingly.

"There you go. Dramatising yourself! What makes you think I'd waste my emotions on you? You women. You think men screw themselves up to your petty tantrums—we just can't be bothered to tell you it's only your female conceit. What the hell d'you think any man cares about you, outside the only things a woman's fit to do? Satisfy him. And give him kids. Don't take yourself so seriously. You don't matter a row of beans to me."

Sarah fell back with a gasp. And Mike, about to go, got up, balancing himself to turn on his crutch. Cold with anger, Tino clutched his arm.

"You'd no damned right to say that."

"Mind your own business."

"It is my business. Sarah's in with us. You're behaving like a savage. Watch your step or we'll have trouble too."

Mike paused. Still and drawn, he glanced down with his enigmatic grin at Tino's hand, clamped so fiercely on his arm; and with an instinctive qualm of regret, Tino let go. (Only Mike could make him feel so compassionate: so confused! The way these things leapt up. Out of nothing!)

"I don't want to scrap with you, Tino."

"But you're asking for it."

"It'll blow over. When does she go on?"

Tino, struggling with resentment, answered shortly, "Sarah's here. You can be polite enough to ask her yourself."

"I beg her pardon. Of course." Mike turned to Sarah. His eyes sparkled cynically. "When do you go on, Sarah?"

There was apprehension in her voice as she replied, "Saturday."

"I must keep my fingers crossed for you."

And Mike stumped away.

When Tino went out into the field with Sarah, his spell of temper was gone: all he had was a sensation of dismay. He looked after Mike and thought he saw in the gaunt arrogant figure an unexpected droop. He had an urge to go after him hurriedly and make it up. It was so foolish! They'd never had a row since the day they'd first teamed up. He knew Sarah was watching him. He could have dispensed with her company: he would rather have been alone to think this out.

But she pressed his arm.

"Don't be angry with me, Tino."

Tino laughed ruefully. "Oh, it's hopeless. I don't see how it'll ever work out."

At this she was silent. She bit her lip. She faltered.

"Do you think that's a nice thing for me to hear?"

"I'm sorry."

"I like it here. I could be happy. I don't want to go."

Then her voice rang out with scorn.

"Oh, I don't know how you put up with him! I could shake you. He's the most loathsome man I ever met."

"Don't be silly."

"Of course, you're different! He's fond of you! But ask anyone else." She made a restless gesture. "Why do you stay with him?"

"He's a very lonely man."

Now he thought she would laugh in his face. She must have though he was really mad. "Mike! He doesn't care for a living soul."

"You just said he cares for me."

She clicked her tongue. "Oh, you're his soft spot. But to the rest of us he's inhuman. He has the sentiments of a brute."

Normally so affectionate, her eyes sparkled with anger. It didn't detract from her beauty; he had never seen her in a mood like this.

He smiled, "Suppose I told you Mike's a very spiritual man who only wants to rise above his flesh, but can't? A man who's in such conflict with himself, you ought to be sorry for him—what would you say to that?"

She answered pityingly, "I'd say go and lie down, *chéri*, you've had a drop too much."

"O.K. Then let's leave it at that."

But she wouldn't. As they crossed the grass, he saw she was thinking it out. Then suddenly, with a secret little laugh, she said, "But, of course, I know what's wrong with him!"

"Do you?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? He's not made like other men. He has something missing. Is it necessary to explain it? His sex is all wrong. He's——" She gave him a sidelong glance to see if he understood.

"You mean he's impotent?"

"But naturally," she said brightly. "It sticks out a mile."

He gaped at her. Then he threw back his head and roared.

"I see nothing funny in it," she retorted sullenly.

"My poor girl, you don't know Mike! Why, when he breaks out he's a terror. There's no stopping him. We have to send out search parties for him. And where d'you think they look?"

"You're joking with me."

"You just wait and see."

She halted. She looked down at the grass. He didn't know why, but he had the feeling that she was not so much shocked as vaguely troubled by what he had just said. Her eyes ranged about uneasily.

She burst out, "I don't believe a word of it!"

And that was all she would say. When they got to her caravan she went straight in without a sign as if annoyed with him. He looked after her and laughed. Women. Could you beat them? If he'd left it with her that poor Mike was lacking, she'd have been smugly content with her superior wisdom: she just didn't like being shown she wasn't as clever as she thought!

But the following morning (which was Saturday) she had forgiven him. She was much too excited by the prospect of her appearance that night. She wasn't frightened: the very reverse. She danced about as if she were to be presented at court. They had a brief practice in the morning (there was

no need to bring Mike into it since the cues concerned only the two men) but Tino could see that they were wasting their time. So helplessly he told her to go and lie down in her caravan and get some rest.

"But why, darling? I'm walking on air!"

"You think you're so good?"

She glowed.

"You've done wonders with me! I owe everything to you!"

"We'll see if you feel like that to-night."

(Provincial French audiences were notoriously brutal—she could be the Queen of Sheba and Cleopatra rolled into one, but if she made a fool of herself up on the ropes they'd put their mouths to the backs of their hands, make derisive sucking noises and hoot and whistle at her until she hid her head in shame. He didn't describe to her what a shocking thing it was.)

When the tent was packed, a suffocating odour hung in the air. Tino, having changed early, slipped on his robe and went to have a look at the audience. He saw a lot of the younger element in the cheaper tiers. The hoi-polloi were there in force to-night. A troupe of "liberty" horses was prancing round the ring, and every now and again a rowdy voice advised the equestrian director exactly to which part of the horses he should apply the hypodermic syringe (for decency's sake, one assumed that to be the instrument prescribed) to liven the animals up. When Tino thought of Sarah, he chuckled wryly. The crowd didn't promise a lot of forbearance or tact.

He went across to Sarah's caravan. He whistled outside. Rosa appeared.

"What are you whistling for?" she asked crossly. "Sarah's got no time for canoodling to-night."

"Tell her to hurry up. It'll do her no harm to get used to the smell of the tent."

Rosa grumbled, "Don't you worry about her. You wouldn't think it was her *première*." She threw an envious glance back inside. "She doesn't know what it is to have circus nerves!"

Sarah came out. She wore the faded robe in which Tino had first seen her. It was much too big for her, reaching nearly to

her ankles; it gave her a tenderly adolescent air. She jumped down and, like an affectionate puppy, pressed close to him, went with Tino across to the tent.

"They're a lively crowd," he warned her. "You'd better come and have a look."

"Oh, they don't worry me."

And she placed her hand on his arm, looked with concern into his face and said kindly, "My pet, you mustn't be so agitated! You won't be any good to-night if you get nervous like that."

He stared at her in amazement.

"It's you I'm nervous about!"

"I?" You could have heard her laugh at the other end of the field. "Why, I couldn't feel better if someone'd left me a million francs!"

(And it was a fact. She just didn't know what she was in for. As she danced along beside him, you would have thought it was a party dress she wore under her robe and not the aerialist's skin-tight brassière and trunks.)

But he'd have betted her million-franc legacy she'd soon change her tune.

As they came into the tent, the music and the fug met them with the impact of a blow. Momentarily dazzled, they found Pat Chantry, red-coated and top-hatted, standing with Judith at the end of the gangway; he turned to Sarah as they approached and gave her the keenest look.

"Feeling all right?"

"But marvellous!"

He nodded approvingly.

"That's the idea."

Judith squeezed Sarah's arm and whispered, "Good luck."

Now they turned their attention to the arena. The cage for Chang and his tiger was being hastily put up. And there went the clowns, bounding and sky-larking into the ring. Louie and Beppo and their various progeny—Coco, with his monstrously-streaked visage, Peanuts, the darkie, Pepi and Sascha, Whisky-Soda and Ginger, Bambi, all fantastically wigged, and Pop, whose vast billowing trousers kept falling

down—a misbegotten family of Punchinellos, rolling in the sand. Who but the most cynical could resist them? The fools had such an age-old charm. Now the music struck up for Chang and he came into the cage. The descending limes carved out on his naked chest the thick muscles that, with conscious pride, he flexed and made stand out like wads. The tiger came on. Poor Chiki had been off colour for days and his skin hung in folds on his ageing frame. He was no jungle monster; he was a tired old cat who had been roused from sleep; it would not be very long before Chang found another tiger to jump through his hoops. Again and again, miserably, he coughed. The crowd stirred restlessly, then laughed. It grew to a derisive roar. The beast cowered. And a storm of catcalls rang through the tent. It was vicious. Tino felt Sarah's hand tighten on his arm.

"Are we next?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm frightened," she whispered.

He looked down at her. Her face was tense, she was pale and he could see her bosom rising and falling with distress.

"They're cruel," she cried.

"We'll soon change that." And he patted her arm.

But he was uneasy. Chang's act was normally popular, it always prepared a comfortable atmosphere for Tino and Mike when they appeared. Pat Chantry beckoned to Chang to cut short his act. He did so, seething. He glared sullenly at the crowd as they hooted, flaunting his whip at them as he drove Chiki off. Tino saw that Mike had now come up. He was looking sharply at Sarah.

"What's wrong?"

"Listen to them. Fiends. I can't go on."

He said gruffly, "Oh, yes, you can. If they open their traps at us I'll go out amongst them with this." He patted his crutch.

But when the limes swung up to the pedestal and the band went into the strains of "*Libiamo*" she shrank: Mike had to mutter harshly, "Get going! We're on!"

They slipped off their robes. Tino took her to the ladder; he

felt her tremble as she climbed. When all three were on the pedestal, he glanced at her and saw that her face was staring; the arcs were livid on her features and her fingers stole into his. He felt a wave of compassion. She was terrified! Of course, a music-hall audience was a very different thing: it was separated from the artistes by the intangible gap of the footlights. Here, you were part of the very texture of the crowd; you hung over them in the blinding shaft of light and the sea of faces was a human carpet. You smelled them too vividly: they came up almost physically and absorbed you. Tino felt Sarah press to him and the flesh of her legs was warm and tremulous against his. He wanted to put his arm round her shoulder; she knew it and, behind him, her soft breasts touched him and the quiver of them moved him to an extraordinary degree. He pressed her hand and whispered, "Keep your eye on me. I'll take you through it and if you don't feel up to it, leave the tricky stuff to me."

"Only be with me!"

He grinned, "You won't be able to shake me off. Come on!"

She took the bar. Then he did an impulsive thing. He kissed her cheek. She turned, surprised. So vividly lit, the crowd saw it and chuckled. It was a friendly thing. Her face worked: it seemed to encourage her for she swung off. Across the tent she went, her slim figure curling to her knees; and she sat. As she came hurtling back, Tino leapt with his own trapeze, catching Mike's growl, "That's what we asked for. Keep close to her. She's going to —— us up!"

But it went smoothly now. They crossed with good timing, jerking the trapezes into wider arcs. At least, she looked good. Her body was a joy. But he could imagine her panting as she swung. She hung from her knees now and was ready for him; as the two bars came close he leapt, somersaulted and caught at her hanging wrists. He had not had time to be frightened of some miscalculation from her, and he only felt it when a hot flooding relief took his stomach: her wrists were stiff and damp. By George, she might easily have let him miss! As they went into a great arc across the dome of the tent, he curled up like a spring, heard a thin ripple of applause, and sat on the bar by

her side. His arm, gripping the rope, was around her shoulder. "Easy. We've got them with us. Don't worry. It's going to be all right now."

"You're wonderful!"

"Shut up. It's you they're giving the hand."

(They weren't. But her eyes were brighter. Poor kid. She'd never know what *he'd* been through!)

They followed through with a few tricky turns and twists, pure exhibitionism, and he knew that it looked good to the staring eyes below. Two young bodies, darting and leaping in sympathetic unison: say what you liked, it warmed you. And though he had intended to stretch out the business a trifle to give the crowd a show, he hurried it up so that she shouldn't have time to think. Then there was a sudden burst of laughter and he knew Mike had started his cavortions. He was sweating next to her. For a little he could relax.

He laughed into her face, "Well, you'll never be nervous again."

She hugged him. Her eyes were like stars.

They swung gently, watching Mike. Now all eyes were on him. In a matter of instants he had the crowd bellowing. He had real artistry: it was instinctive in his bones. Even Sarah muttered, "I hate him, but he's a genius. I never saw anything like it before."

It was soon time for Tino to mix in with Mike. He nudged her. "All over bar the shouting." He found his own trapeze and went into the climax. The strains of "*Libiamo*" seemed to waft him and, as Mike made his fall, he took the cue and went for the crutch. Even in mid-air he sensed the gasp, then the hush. It was all over. He dangled from the heel of the crutch, staring up into Mike's inverted face. The band crashed into the finale. They were back on the pedestal where Sarah was waiting and took their bows.

The limes dipped. The clowns were on. Mike went sliding to the ground. Tino followed with Sarah. At this moment she brushed against him. Her skin was fierily, silkily hot; his body seemed to give a quite peculiar leap. He did not move. He was conscious, as she looked demurely and patiently into his face,

of the animal, yet excessively sweet, fragrance of her hair. There was a film of sweat on her features; she glowed. He saw her breasts swelling with deep breaths under her little brassière and he did not know what came over him: he wanted to feel the greater warmth of her, he must have half put out his hands: it was the most frightening yearning he had ever had. He stared blankly into her face. "Tino?" she whispered. He could not move. He made a strange gesture. He must have given some sort of sound for she smiled inquiringly and pointed down.

At the bottom she called out to him, "Catch!" She dropped lightly into his arms. Again it enveloped him; she was soft and palpitant against him. His heart contracted: really, it ached. She was laughing breathlessly. But because he did not release her, she put her hand on his chest, pressing him back to look curiously into his face. Again, "Tino?" He shook his head. He walked away. He passed Judith, dragging on his robe, but instead of going into the changing tent, he went straight out into the silent field and dropped into the darkness of the grass.

Later, he heard someone moving in the grass. The stars were dim. He made out Sarah's figure in her robe: he whispered to her. She came up. She sat. "I saw you go. What's wrong?"

He did not take his eyes off her. Suddenly, they had filled with tears. She gave a pitying gasp. "*Chèri!*" She put her arms about him. "Don't you know how fond I am of you too?" She kissed away his tears. She rocked him as she would a child. Then she undid her robe and pressed his hot face to her breasts, fondling his cheeks.

"How foolish you are. You should have known." She kissed him: his eyes, his hair. He sighed and strained her close. When, at last, they lay still, the wind was sighing in the hedge and a few drops of stinging rain had begun to fall.

At length:

"Let's go," she whispered.

"Sarah."

"I know, it's wonderful," she giggled, "but nothing makes a man change his mind in the morning like a cold in the head. I don't want to lose you, my pet."

They got up. Across the meadow, the tent glowed with light; they heard the band going into the final march.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You know, I had a feeling about you the moment you walked into my dressing-room at the music-hall," she said. Again she laughed softly. "But I didn't know it'd happen like this."

She held up her face naïvely to be kissed. Then, hand in hand, they went back across the field.

IV

It was his first waking thought: very early, he stretched out his hand and whispered, "Sarah."

And in an instant, from a heavy dreamless sleep that seemed to have brought him no rest, he was plunged into distracted thought. He lay quite still, staring at the wisp of curtain fluttering in the first morning breeze. He had got in rather late last night for fear of waking Mike. He had felt stifled, the caravan roof seemed to press down on him; but for Mike in the next bunk, he would have got up and sat the night through; his nerves were leaping so. Now, of course, his whole body should have started up with a lover's bliss—he should have dwelt on every whisper, every caress of last night—going straight to the door, stretching his muscles, exultant and agog. It was no use pretending. He felt no such thing. And because he still felt flushed and uneasy, he didn't want Mike talking to him when he awoke; so he crept out of his bunk silently and dressed. Mike slept with the rigor of death. His face was pale and childlike, one thin sinewy hand stretched out, touching his crutch. Poor Mike! Tino went out on tip-toe and hurried across the grass.

It was dawn. The sky was milky, with a washed-out look, but where the sun was coming up it trembled with a silky sheen. The shadows of the trees lay right across the field, making it dusky: it was unearthly: with a stillness that was not broken by a single bird. But in the stable tents the horses

were nickering, and from one of the caravans a thin coil of smoke rose into the languid air. He went into one of the stable tents, sitting on the straw. The horse stamping in the shadows next to him was Rosa's: the white Lippizan. There in the stall, Tino tried to compose his thoughts.

He had never felt anything like this. It was an emotion that seemed to leave him naked. He couldn't take his mind off Sarah's face. Literally, he ached for her. In his tight chest was an actual pain. He could not imagine where it had sprung from—in the twinkling of an eye, up there on the pedestal, his whole life had been changed. He had read a lot about love. Fools! They didn't know what they were talking about. They breathed a lot of sublime tenderness and nobility. Well, they could never have known a rending passion like this. It was brutal: commanding: possessing you, body and soul. He had felt like this when they took him prisoner in North Africa—what engulfed him now was just as much a captor as the barbed wire had been then. Sarah rushed back into his thoughts—he recalled her face, lit by the glow of the distant tent, flower-like and remote—she had lain in his arms, stroking his cheek with content. Then he thought of Judith and sighed. So a long time passed. Presently, he heard voices in the field. He didn't want to be caught here in the stalls, so he slipped out. No one saw him. A few figures were moving in the meadow, the camp was coming to life. As he passed the caravan, Mike came out. His face lit up. He shouted,

"Where the devil did you get to?"

"It was such a lovely morning, Mike."

Mike chuckled.

"We've had lovely mornings before, but I've never known 'em dig you out of your bunk!"

They crossed for breakfast. Tino said nothing. He was quite startled when Mike's hand stole on to his shoulder. Mike held him back to look curiously into his face.

"Off colour?"

"No."

"You look damned pale."

"Oh, I'm all right. It was a bit worrying last night."

"I'll say! She got panicky. Christ, I sweated." But Mike didn't take his eyes off Tino's face. He added softly, "You look steam-rollered. Take it easy to-day."

The breakfast tent was filling up. Sarah was not yet there. Tino saw Judith, nodded, and thereafter ate with his eyes on his plate. The rough conversation flowed over his head. When Mike spoke to him he answered in monosyllables—he just couldn't concentrate on whatever he said. Soon, Sarah came in. She looked fresh and vivacious. It astonished him. He should not have stared at her so, but his eyes followed her hungrily. She flashed him a bright understanding smile, moving him inexpressibly. He didn't know what was in it: gaiety, satisfaction and sheer good-nature: all he knew was that he felt nothing like that. He felt drained. Everybody went on talking. Then, suddenly, Rosa's husky voice boomed across the table. She was staring slyly at Sarah.

"Where did you disappear to last night after the act?"

"I went out for a breath of air."

"Tell that to the marines, old girl!" ("*A d'autres, ma vieille!*")

"Believe it or not."

"Well, you were a long time getting it. Did you have to roll about for it? Your robe was all covered with grass."

There was a silence; then several at the table guffawed. Sarah wasn't in the least put out. Her eyes danced. .

"Getting jealous, Rosa?"

Rosa's voice was coarse. "When I'm in the mood for that business, I know the proper place for it. My bunk."

Rosa could be brutal. She turned her eyes down the table. Morosely, she cried,

"Eh? What do you say, Tino?"

"I?"

"Yes, you. What are you blushing for?"

Tino's head was bent. His face flamed.

"Oh, shut up."

But everyone was looking at him. He knew what was revealed on his hot face. In an instant, as if photographically recorded, he had a sidelong vision of Mike's fork, by his elbow,

hung in mid-air, his face turned to stare at him unbelievingly: and Judith, looking startled at first, then appallingly shocked. Someone nudged him. (Beppo?) "Making hay while the sun shines, eh?"

"I don't know what the hell Rosa's talking about."

"I'll bet we could find plenty of grass on your robe too!"

And then they wouldn't leave him alone. Sarah laughed and fended off the gibes easily. But for Tino the meal couldn't end too soon. As they streamed out of the tent, he saw Mike give him a bitter look, then hurry off. Judith avoided him, going out of the other end of the tent. Sarah came up to him and took his arm as they went out.

She whispered, "You have a face that betrays you, my sweet. Don't mind if I walk with you." She added, "It's the only way to show them that Rosa's a fool!"

But she laughed under her breath.

"She isn't, though. Oh, I'm mad on you, *chéri*!"

Of course, immediately it was all over the camp. The artistes were no fools. They had eyes in their heads. Then, because Tino met their witticisms blankly, because Sarah only smiled serenely, it was a few days' wonder in the camp; then, quite naturally, the coarse jests died down. Everybody knew. Everybody accepted it. If Tino had gone to share a caravan with Sarah (not that Pat would have stood for it), from the artistes' simple point of view, that, too, would have been quite all right. ("Young love! Who cares?")

But Tino avoided them. He could not keep away from Sarah, but as much as he could he met her outside the camp. Sometimes they borrowed horses—separately—and went for a canter, rejoining well away from the town. The performers chuckled. It would have been just as sensible if they'd gone off openly. Sarah was right when she told Tino pityingly that stratagems like that wouldn't deceive idiots, much less circus folk who could smell out a romance ten kilometres off.

"And what's there to be ashamed of? It's so absurd!"

Or sometimes he met her by the stream that ran not far from the camp. Here it swelled into a pool, the willows bowed low

over the water; and it was so quiet that the insects could be heard humming in the sun that pierced, like sabres, the encroaching trees. None of the artistes went near it—bathing, particularly in open water, was something they regarded as highly dangerous. A good douse in the changing tent or the privacy of the caravan—*tiens!* that was one thing: but to expose the body to the hazards of insects or microbes ("beasts of the air!") was madness—the performers who courted broken limbs nightly truly believed it to be fraught with frightful risks. Sarah and Tino swam there. He was a modest youth and it gave him an odd sensation, there in the bold sunlight, to feel the chilled silkiness of her skin brushing his, the floating touch of her naked breasts. Her face shone. Her hair streamed in the water. She was like some wood-nymph, disporting herself with delight. It was a hot afternoon. After a while, he climbed out. She followed.

"Give me the towel!"

She dried herself. Presently, when they had dressed, they lay down on the grass. He did not choose to speak for a time, he lay watching the leaves above him fluttering in the sun. Then he was conscious that her head was turned to him fondly.

"Don't be so upset. What's wrong?"

"You don't understand."

"I love you. You love me. It's delightful. It's such a natural thing. When it comes to people like us we should seize it with all our hearts. Shall we always be young? *Jeunesse ne dure qu'un moment!*" She hugged him. "And, of course, you're very handsome. I'm terribly proud of my conquest, my sweet."

Then because he looked strained:

"Is it Judith?"

"Can't you guess what she's feeling?"

She looked down at the ground. For the first time she was thoughtful. A sweet, yet ingenuous, smile flitted across her face.

"Well, she's very loyal. Perhaps she understands that in this life nothing lasts for ever."

He could only look at her in amazement. His mouth trembled.

"If you knew how I felt about us, you wouldn't say that!"

But she moved impulsively and with a soft cry pressed her lips to his. Her breath had a singular perfume. It wrung from him an unwilling gasp.

"Darling, I'm crazy about you! Don't I give you all my love?" She crooned into his ear, "What's the use of worrying about things like that? We're in love to-day and to-morrow it may be gone. Let's take it quickly while we can!"

And as if to relieve his uncertainties she offered herself with an abundance he had never known before. His senses swam. But when, at length, his spirit seemed to soar, released from the burden of his flesh, he knew exactly what it was about her that eluded him. She simply gave herself with kindliness because it was as instinctive in her as it was for a bird to fly. She was made for love. She was fulfilling herself. But it was utterly without passion. And when it was over she was free gaily to devote herself to the other joys of life. He thought strangely, "It's like clutching at the shadows of those leaves on the water —lovely to look at—but I put out my hand for them and there's nothing there!" It just gave her the greatest pleasure to make him happy. She was in love with the act of love.

As for Pat, it must have come to his ears late. He passed Tino one day and went brushing by with a searching vindictive look. He must have been simmering over Judith. The rebuff made Tino go hot. Judith continued to avoid him. When, at last, Tino found her alone, it was too late for her to slip away.

"Judith."

"Hello, Tino. Quite a stranger."

"It hasn't been my fault. Don't keep out of my way. I want to talk to you."

Her head was bent. Then, "No. I'd rather not." When she lifted her eyes to his, he was horrified to see that they sparkled with tears. "You don't understand women very well, do you?"

"No. I'm a fool with them."

"Well, don't you think you're making something tragic out

of an affair that none of us can help? I haven't reproached you."

"But you should."

"Why? Would that bring you back? Anyway," she giggled, "I wouldn't know how to do it with dignity!"

And that was as much as he could get her to say.

So those hot days at Marseilles slipped out of his hands. There was a real sultry edge to them. And all the time, Mike went about with a stony face.

Mike had retired into a shell of loneliness. He seemed to be derisive, yet strained. But sometimes, in the bunks at night, Tino caught him looking at him with a speculative glint in his eye. Once, he burst out:

"I don't know what's got into you, Mike. Look here, let's go out and have a binge and forget the whole damn thing!"

"I don't know what thing you mean."

"Oh, come off it! Sarah."

"Am I worrying you?"

"I can see it's got under your skin."

"I've looked after my skin for a long time. I don't need you to fret about it now."

But it wasn't so easy for Sarah to be so aloof. Of course, Mike had the knack of ferocious banter—and while he never spoke to her direct, he made oblique remarks that could only be meant to refer to her. They stung. And the moment she had a retort ready for him, he seemed to sense it in advance and hobbled swiftly off. It left her doubly incensed. A woman deprived of the last word was a terrible thing.

"Coward," she flung after him.

"Oh, leave him alone," said Tino, clicking his tongue. "If you can't stand him, keep out of his way."

"No. Let him keep out of mine!"

She looked dark. She fidgeted.

"He's unbearable. He's not a man," she burst out. "He's like one of those ancient monstrosities—he should have horns and a cloven hoof!"

Tino grinned. "Well, he hasn't." (But, come to think of it,

it wasn't such a wild conception. Sarah's angry instinct had hit on it—Pan's goat horns and hooves: they'd have suited Mike.)

Now Mike's face seemed to have grown more hollow and there was a restless shine in his eyes. It was the strange transparency in the skin of his face that perturbed Tino; the sensuality of his lips seemed infinitely more marked. Yet it was pathetic: at times like these, some kind of devil seemed to be tormenting him. You felt that he was battling with something within and you could only watch for the outcome with pitying eyes. Or so it seemed to Tino. He had an instinct that every particle of Mike's body was moving irresistibly to one of his periodic outbreaks.

And, queerly, it came.

One afternoon, Tino was returning to the camp when he met Rosa cantering on a pony. She reined up at the sight of him and leaned down.

"Well, your crazy friend's had it!"

"Mike? What's happened?"

"Another inch, and Chiki would have robbed him of an arm as well as a leg."

Tino stopped dead.

"Is he hurt?"

She shrugged.

"He bleeds. He won't die." And she gave her husky laugh. "Not that anybody would care."

Tino began to run. She trotted her pony beside him.

"Who's with him?" he cried.

"Why, nobody. Who'd want to touch a brute like that?"

Then she told him this tale as he ran along,

"I was there. It was in the menagerie tent. I tell you, I never saw such an incredible business in all my life. Mad, mad! Chang was cleaning out Chiki's cage. The tiger lay still. The beast, you know, has no more life. Then up comes Mike. He stands, leaning on his crutch. You can see at once he is in one of his peculiar moods. He starts to provoke Chang. 'Your act's going to bits. You and your tiger are all washed up.' Well, Chang gives him a dirty look. He's in no sweet temper, either.

'Maybe you can do better?' he says. But Mike only laughs. You know that sarcastic laugh of his? As though he is pouring something bitter out of his soul. 'You're damn right I can,' he answers. 'Why don't you teach that blasted tiger to sing?' "

Now Rosa threw back her head and guffawed. She was amazed.

"Eh? Sing! I ask you! Even Chang stares with his eyes popping out. 'Are you mad?' he says to Mike. But Mike looks at him. 'Yes, sing, God damn you,' he says. And he goes over to the cage. He says to Chiki, 'Open your mouth and sing.' Chiki just coughs. So Mike stirs him up with his crutch. 'Better than that,' he cries. 'Get up, you brute, and give us a song.' And he prods harder and harder at the tiger's ribs with his crutch. Fantastic! I don't know what came over the man. Then there's a snarl. Mike cries louder, 'That's better!' And then there's a flash. Chiki strikes through the bars. It's all over. Mike goes staggering back with his sleeve in ribbons, cursing like mad, and Chang has to leap for his life out of the cage. The blood is pouring down Mike's arm. Chang screams at him, 'You're crazy, he could have killed you.' Mike only laughs. 'Shut up. The beast's got more gumption than you.' "

Tino cried, "What on earth got into him?"

Rosa leaned over her pony's crupper emphatically.

"Don't you know that maniac? He's a man who imposes his will so cruelly upon himself, he has to relieve it by imposing it upon a savage beast too." Rosa chuckled confidentially. "Well, Chiki doesn't understand psychology. Mike started with the wrong merchant there."

Now they burst into the field. Far across it Tino could see a little knot of performers gossiping excitedly outside the caravan. When he reached it, he hurried inside. Mike was sitting on his bunk. He was pale; he had torn up a shirt and had wrapped it loosely round his arm, pressing it to staunch the blood. Chang stood there helplessly with a first-aid box in his hands. He appealed to Tino, "He won't let me touch him."

"Leave him to me."

Chang shrugged, left the first-aid box and went outside.

"You damned fool," said Tino.

He pushed Mike back and started to unwrap the bindings torn from the shirt. Down Mike's arm ran parallel rows of scratches, not very deep, but cut as with razors; they were angry with blood. It turned Tino's stomach to think how near Chiki had come to ripping the arm to shreds. "You can't be trusted alone!"

"I'm all right."

Tino filled a bowl with water. He trembled with rage.

"Give me a cigarette," said Mike.

"You make me hopping mad."

"Give me a cigarette, you ass. Chiki and I just had a bit of fun."

Then there was a movement on the caravan step and Tino saw that Sarah had come hesitantly into the doorway. She stood there for a moment while Tino found a sponge, watching the blood welling down Mike's arm. She said nothing. Her brows were knitted. She did not stir.

Tino began to sponge the wounds. He had pushed a cigarette between Mike's lips and Mike, lighting it, lay back calmly and smoked. He might have been a disinterested spectator. But when Tino, with a hurried sidelong glance, looked at Sarah, he saw that she was white and that her eyes were fixed with a hateful fascination on Mike's arm. At length, she said sullenly,

"Better let me do that. I'm used to such things."

Tino's hands were not steady. It might have been anger; emotion: he muttered, "All right."

She came over. She took the sponge and washed down Mike's arm. Tino watched her. Though she was repressed, she was efficient. She did not lift her eyes to Mike's face, yet it seemed that only by an effort did she keep them away; as for Mike, he lay back coolly, watching the smoke of his cigarette drifting up. He could not have cared less who it was that was attending him. She worked swiftly. She only spoke once, in a low voice, saying to Mike, "This will hurt." He ignored her. She doused the wounds well with antiseptic. She strapped some lint down with plaster and bandaged the arm. No one

could have dressed it better. Then, as she came to the last knot, Tino saw that Mike had raised his head slightly and was watching her with a curious irony in his eyes. She was aware of it; it made her fumble, tying the bandage. Clearly, she was forcing herself not to look at him. But irresistibly he drew her stare. They looked at each other. There was a mockery in Mike's glance that made her recoil. She gave a distinct shudder. Then she sighed. She muttered, "That'll do."

She turned and went.

Mike had lain back. When he caught Tino's resentful look, his eyes were bright and thoughtful. They looked right through Tino. "I'll have a snooze."

"You won't be able to go on to-night."

"That's certain."

"I'll tell Pat."

"Tell him what the hell you like. It doesn't interest me."

Tino left him and found Sarah waiting for him outside. They crossed the field together. She didn't seem inclined to talk. But Tino put his arm affectionately round her shoulder and smiled, "What on earth made you do that?"

She shrugged. She answered vaguely:

"Everybody knows an animal's claws are septic. He might easily have lost his arm."

"It tickled Mike to think you cared."

She burst out, angrily, "Care? Why should I care what happens to him? I'm a woman. It's an instinct with us to do such things." She was breathing quickly. "Believe me, it made me feel unwell to have to touch him. Oh, I despise him. I don't know how I went through with it." She walked with her eyes cast down, and with an irritable twitch of her shoulder shook his arm from her back. They were approaching Pat Chantry's trailer. She stopped. He saw with seriousness that her face, glistening with pallor, was turned up to him supplicatingly.

"Tino, let's go away!"

He was startled.

"What on earth do you mean?"

She seized his hands.

"I beg of you! Come away! Marcel will find us jobs, perhaps in a music-hall, another circus maybe. If we stay here something dreadful will happen. I feel it in my bones. Let's go quickly. Oh, we'll be all right together. If I stay, he'll do me some terrible harm."

"Mike?"

"You don't know what he's like. Please take me away! At once."

He stared at her. He couldn't imagine what had got into her: what was shaking her, exactly as though she were ill.

"We're signed up with Pat. We can't walk out on a boss."

"Must I beg of you like this?"

"What the devil can Mike do to you?"

"He terrifies me. Oh, I shouldn't have to tell you how I feel!"

And her fingers twined themselves in his. Her buoyant self-possession, as much a part of her as her dark glowing eyes, was utterly gone. It was hard to recognise her: she was no longer a gay young woman whose mischievous twinkle and ready tongue warned you that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself; she was really panic-stricken, he thought. Of course, she hadn't bothered to follow the suggestion through in her mind! It was born of a feminine caprice—a wild illogical loathing of Mike. But he could see farther. With Mike they were a team, they had something—individuality, variety, spice?—call it what you liked! Alone, he and Sarah were just an attractive young couple, nothing a theatrical manager would get madly excited about. They could throw away their future in a moment's waywardness. She couldn't begin to imagine what effort, what tenacity, what ingenuity, it had taken for Mike and him to build up the successful act they had! His heart sank. Oh, he could so easily visualize the seedy round of music-halls they'd have to work, the filthy dressing-rooms, the indifferent agents, fighting for a place on some provincial bill that, with Mike, they wouldn't be seen dead on—the mortifying waiting on managers who couldn't be bothered with them ("a nice pair, no doubt—oh, he's smart enough, she's got sex—but, *voyons*, where's the tang, the

spark? No. We can't use them! Put on a trick-cyclist instead!") He sighed.

But, at length, he answered, "All right."

"To-day?"

"Sarah," he said gently, "we'd get our names black-listed. You're not being reasonable."

"Fool!" She made a confused sound; it broke with a sob in her throat. "If to be reasonable is to fight against every instinct, I want to be stupid. Then you won't come?"

"As soon as we can fix it with Pat."

"Oh, never mind."

"It's a promise."

She scanned his face. Then she gave a short laugh.

"No, forget it. It doesn't matter now."

When he tried to touch her, she made a curt movement and hurried away.

Tino went into Pat's trailer. He found that Pat had already heard of Mike's misadventure. He was fuming.

"Tell him from me, I wouldn't have given a goddam hoot if that tiger had finished him off."

"You don't think he asked for it, do you?"

"I don't know what the devil he asks for, all I know is what he gives me. And that's trouble. I sometimes wonder if he's worth keeping on. How long's he going to be out?"

"Six or seven days."

"You and Sarah'll have to go on alone. Can you manage?"

"Sure."

"Someone fixed up Mike's arm?"

"Sarah. She thought it might fester if it wasn't seen to. He might easily have lost his arm."

Pat curled his lips. He laughed shortly.

"Well, it wouldn't have worried me!"

Next day, Mike was up and about. He was as spry as a cricket. Tino had never seen him in such a lively mood. Chastened? On the contrary, you'd have thought his grotesque mishap had enormously stimulated him. He hobbled around the camp, cracking jokes, telling everyone that, as near as

damn it, he'd come close to making Chiki sing. "I'd have made the yellow bastard give out with 'God Save the King', take it from me!"

Rosa had to stare at him admiringly.

"You madman. Don't you know what a frightful risk you took?"

"Just skittishness. That tiger was a damn sight more frightened than me."

And he taunted Chang over meals, telling him he didn't know how to handle tigers; he wasn't smart enough, in fact, to shovel straw into the cage.

"Fetch him to me and I'll show you what to do with him!"

Chang looked sullen.

"I only wish they'd let me. I know what Chiki could do with you."

Anyway, whatever had given Mike such a fillip—and probably it was only his impudent way of cocking a snook at fate!—Tino was glad to see him as jaunty as this. There was an excited glint in his eyes. Tino might have suspected the bottle, except that Mike could drink interminably, without apparent effect on him. He dressed Mike's arm himself each night (he asked Sarah first if she wanted to see to it, but she shrugged and said, "Never! It would make me ill to touch him again.") Within a few days, the deep weals needed only plaster and Mike appeared in the act once more. His cavortions on the wire wouldn't trouble him, but Tino hesitated about the big jump at the climax: the jolting strain on Mike's arms as Tino leapt for the crutch would be pretty severe. But Mike laughed away his fears. The act went through without a fault. The wounds did not open and Tino was satisfied that they would be all right.

Then, on the morning after his reappearance, Mike took Tino aside and said this surprising thing,

"I want to throw a little party. Just to celebrate my being up and about."

Tino grinned at him tolerantly.

"Suits me. Glad to see you're more like yourself again."

"All right. I'll take Rosa. You fetch Sarah along."

Now Tino could only stare.

"Sarah?" He couldn't believe his ears. "You can't be serious!"

"Well, it won't be much of a party, two men. Rosa makes me laugh. And you wouldn't want to take anyone else but Sarah, would you?"

Tino gave it some thought. He stole a look at Mike's face. The Irishman smiled back at him placidly.

"We're getting stale. It ought to be damned good fun."

"You'd behave yourself, Mike? I wouldn't want you to go crude on her."

"Forget all that. I'll be as good as gold."

"I don't know if she'll want to come."

"Well, ask her. Tell her that it was I who asked if she'd come along."

"When do you want to throw it?"

"To-night. I'll borrow one of the trucks and we'll drive into Marseilles."

"All right." Tino chuckled ruefully. "But I can tell you now what Sarah's going to say."

He went over to Sarah's caravan later in the morning. She was washing some flimsy silks in a bowl of suds; she gave him a vague look, nodded, and went on rinsing her things. She had, during the last couple of days, slipped into an introspective mood. Rosa lay plumply on her bunk, munching chocolates as she read a book. First, Tino exchanged a little repartee with her, telling her that her gluttony was making her fat. It was crude but cheerful. Then he came quickly to the point.

"Look here. How'd you two girls like to come to a party to-night?"

(It might be as well to get their general acceptance before he told them who was throwing it.)

Rosa sat up. Her eyes shone.

"That's a fine idea. I haven't been out for weeks."

Sarah gave him a sharp look. Then she shrugged. "I don't mind. But why?"

"To celebrate Mike's coming back into the act."

Rosa flung back her head. She hooted.

"That's not something to celebrate. That's something you just want to get drunk about to forget!"

But Sarah asked curiously, "Who's giving the party?"

"Why, Mike, of course."

Instantly, Rosa's smile went. She stared at him. Sarah's hands gripped hold of the wet silk and screwed it: it was quite convulsive. Then she said violently, "No! No!" She turned away to dry her hands.

Rosa said softly to Tino, "My friend, you must be utterly out of your mind."

"I won't go," cried Sarah.

"Think it over," said Tino. "If Mike wants to bury the hatchet, I don't see why you shouldn't give him the chance."

Rosa burbled with her husky laughter. "Only be careful where Mike buries the hatchet. It'll always be in someone's skull! Whose idea was it?"

"His."

"Don't ask me again," said Sarah angrily. "I won't think of it. I won't sit at the same table as that monstrous man."

"But he specially asked for you."

"For me?"

"Let's be decent. He said I should tell you he asked for you to come along."

Sarah cast down her eyes. She seemed deep in sullen thought. Rosa, looking at her with an odd scrutiny, wrinkled her lips and said, "Don't go, Sarah. Tell him to go to hell."

Sarah muttered, "It's incomprehensible."

Tino put out his hands.

"What can we lose?"

"You're mad," said Rosa.

"Now, Rosa, don't you go Russian on me. Let Sarah decide for herself."

Sarah struggled to speak. Tino—though later he thought he must have been deceived—thought she was very close to tears. At last she gave a long sigh.

"Forget it," he said. "I told him, anyway, you wouldn't want to go. It's not worth upsetting yourself."

He rose to go.

"No, wait!" she said. She stared at him. She searched his face intently. It was exactly as though she sought there strength and guidance. And perhaps she did not find it. Her lips moulded themselves into a reluctant smile. She wrung out the words, "All right. Tell him we'll come."

"Well," said Rosa cynically, flinging herself on her bunk, "there's one thing. At least, that party ought to be something to see!"

When Tino went back and told Mike, he merely smiled coolly. He didn't seem surprised.

"Straight after the show. By gum, I'll show you the kind of place you've never set foot in before!"

V

When they had changed after the performance that night, Tino and Mike waited by the truck. Soon, out of the shadows, Rosa and Sarah approached. Rosa had adorned herself somewhat gaudily. She had no taste for clothes, yet the barbaric bits of tinsel, the heavy make-up, the flaringly coloured blouse she wore suited her eastern look; the bandeau she sported on her shiny black hair gave her plump inscrutable features the air of a Byzantine empress. You could see that she was looking forward to the party with relish. Sarah wore her light coat draped around her shoulders. There was little colour in her face. Her soft hair was unbound. And by the side of Rosa she looked amazingly youthful and demure. She did not glance at Mike as Tino handed her up into the truck. Rosa was very careful to sit between Sarah and Mike. Tino drove the truck into Marseilles.

The journey wasn't dull. It couldn't be with Rosa and Mike. Rosa talked nineteen to the dozen, and Mike capped every one of her stories with another, each more outrageous than hers. Soon he had her giggling away. At least, two of them had the party spirit! And Tino had to grin over the wheel. But Sarah was silent. She did not smile once. Tino, glancing at her, shook his head: oh, Christmas: the poor girl was going to be a

wet blanket, he thought. Mike directed Tino toward the quays and in a dark street near the *Boulevard des Dames* told him to park the truck. They climbed down. Mike led the way past the great fish market and they went down another street, this one garishly lit. Tino looked around curiously. The houses, peeling and decrepit, leaned in towards one another: the windows were flung wide, and behind the fluttering curtains you saw men and women moving about; and the sounds of reedy gramophones and radios poured into the night. At many of the windows, women leaned on the sills and called out, sometimes to each other, sometimes to the passing men. In an occasional window, you saw a girl in her underclothes walking unconcernedly about; from another there was a squally burst of laughter, then a woman's raucous cry. Of a sudden, the street became crowded. They were chiefly men there, sailors, most of them white, though there were many lascars and negroes too; you saw the red pom-poms on the hats of the French and the white canvas caps of Americans coming out of the gloom. For all the undercurrent of music and laughter, the street had a vaguely oppressive air. There was something intense and desirous about it. Sordid as it was, it had the sinister beauty of a spider. It made your skin tingle. They were in the red light district, Tino hadn't a doubt. Suddenly, Mike beckoned. He pushed open the door of a café and they followed him inside.

The heat and the light, clouded with smoke, hit them like a blow. It was crowded, tables were set round the walls and there was a meagre space for dancing in the centre of the floor. On it, a packed little mob jostled to the music of a pianist, an accordionist and a saxophonist. It was the popular music of the day they played, but they gave it a lilt, a strange slurring rhythm that was not easy for dancing yet fell excitingly on the ear. There were a few sailors. You heard French and English gabbled, and amidst the burst of laughter from one table the sharper intonation of Americans. It was unbearably hot. The men, those not from the ships, wore light narrow-waisted coats and for the most part no ties, and they danced with their caps on and cigarettes in their mouths. The girls nestled close,

several in evening gowns, so that they looked out of place next to their partners in caps and scarves. The café was filled with a babel of sound. It had a rough energetic vitality that seemed to pulse.

The moment the *patron* caught sight of Mike, he lifted his eyebrows. He came across, grinning all over his face. He was a big fleshy man with a bristling waxed moustache. He was in his shirt-sleeves. He sweated copiously. He knew Mike, for he patted his crutch affectionately and clapped his arm on his back. "Well, *mon brave*, it's been a long time, eh? You want to sit or go to the bar?"

"Find us a good table. It's a party, Aristide."

"Leave it to me!"

The *patron* glared round, fastened his eye fiercely on a table at which two girls in evening dress (they looked like hostesses) sat with a couple of men in caps. He went over and whispered to the girls; they looked surprised but got up obediently and went and sat on a long form at the side with other girls, similarly dressed. The two men muttered, they gave the *patron* dirty looks, but when they took another glance at his big body they spat out their cigarettes and sidled sulkily away. The *patron* wiped the beer rings off the table with a sweep of his sleeve and with a beam beckoned to Mike. The four of them sat.

"I heard your circus was in town, Mike. It's good?"

"Only when my act's on." (At this, Rosa gave Mike a sour look.)

"You want something to eat?"

"If you've got anything that's fit to be put on a plate. And fetch us some decent drinks."

The *patron* chuckled. He went over to the bar, said something to a slatternly waiter and pointed. The waiter's opaque eyes followed his hand to the table and nodded. He hurried across with some drinks.

Rosa, looking round, said curiously, "This is some joint. Eh?"

Mike smiled. "Oh, I've had a bit of fun here in the past."

"You know what sort of place it is?"

Mike looked at her naïvely. His eyes glimmered.

"No. What?"

She gave him an odd searching stare and said, "Never mind."

They drank. Sarah looked about surreptitiously, then stared at the table. She barely touched her drink.

"I thought you'd like to see a place with a bit of a kick," said Mike. "Say what you like about it, nobody's dull here! It's got the stuff of life!"

Tino wasn't quite sure if this was the best phrase for it, but the description wasn't far off the truth. He, too, stared about. It was like a painting, daubed in vivid colours, crudely done, yet throbbing with vehemence. It was as pungent as a highly-spiced dish. But what brooded over it—unashamed and palpable—was sex. The men and the women danced with unction (there was no other word for it), they were pressed close and the women—girls, rather—with half-closed eyes had their cheeks against those of the men. Their bodies moulded together, so that they drew out of the music a cloying erotic excitement. They were very quiet. The men's eyes drooped. They sweated in the heat. On the floor, you saw some women dancing together: and when Tino looked closer at one pair he saw that, made-up heavily as they were and sleekly gowned, they were clearly boys. The Negroes danced with slapping feet. Their eyes, as the music leapt with its curious ardour, bulged. The girls were not put out by their glistening black skins, indeed, a little squabble broke out amongst two girls over a Negro, who watched with dreamy glance. He looked quite drugged. The squabble was ended by the *patron*, who slapped their backsides crisply, and driving them off, pushed the Negro jovially into a chair. He lolled there until another girl in a flame-coloured dress crept up and sat beside him, taking his hand. There was a Levantine in a European suit and a *tarboosh*; he danced with great decorum, but when the music ended he whispered to the girl and they went to a door through which you saw some stairs. Above, you couldn't doubt, was a house of assignation. One of the girls in evening dress, sitting on the form against the wall, rose occasionally as one of the

men approached her—some young American sailor, perhaps—joined him at his table for a drink, then went with him to the door toward the stairs. Tino felt a curious stir. He looked at Mike keenly. He had expected to be taken to a bit of a bright spot, he was as game as anybody for a spot of fun, but he wondered why Mike had to bring the two girls to a place like this.

("Just damned contrary!" he thought. It was no use expecting Mike to do the normal thing.)

At this point, the waiter brought over their food, a *ragoût*, and some bottles of crude red wine. Aristide followed to see that everything was all right. Mike nudged the bottles contemptuously.

"Take this damned ink away. We'll have champagne."

"Certainly."

Mike's eyes gleamed.

"Do I have to go with you to the cellar?"

Again the *patron* chuckled.

"No, Mike. You'll get the best. I don't want a crack with a bottle over my head."

Already, Rosa was beginning to curse feebly at the heat. She wiped her face, then with a determined gesture undid the top button of her blouse and ate with gusto. The *ragoût* was highly-seasoned. When the waiter brought the champagne and filled their glasses, Mike spoke his first words to Sarah, "D'you like champagne?"

"I don't drink much."

"You'll get a taste for it when you take a sip of this."

She sipped it. He was looking at her. There was a good-natured grin of mockery on his lips. She caught his eye and her face flamed. Then she gave a little laugh, hesitated, and quickly drained the glass. Mike filled it again.

"Don't let him show you the way to guzzle that bubbly," said Rosa coarsely. "He's got a head that can carry it. You haven't."

"You underestimate her," said Mike. "How do you know what she's got?"

"You shut up. You're a devil."

"D'you think I'm trying to make her drunk?"

"I don't know what you're trying to do, but you won't get away with it."

When the music started again, they could hardly hear themselves speak. They ate. Then Tino looked up at Sarah. She was not touching her plate, she was staring secretively round the room. He had never seen such a vivid change in her. Her face was rapt, there was a sparkle in her eyes and the colour over her cheek-bones had gone high: he could see her head swaying imperceptibly to the rhythm of the band. She breathed at a hurried rate. Rosa, too, looked at her and seemed sullen. She threw a sombre glance at Tino and he tried to read in it what she sought to convey. What? Uneasiness and anger, he thought. He felt unsettled now. Suddenly, he thought he could see through Mike. He would try to get Sarah muzzy, then score a few sharp digs at her. It was just his idea of fun. In this blatant erotic atmosphere, so breathless with sex, he could easily get his own back by making a fool of her. She wasn't used to this. Damn him! Tino stared hard at Mike. His pale face was a little flushed, his red hair seemed to burn, making his freckle-brushed skin all the more transparent. He seemed agog, and though he winked at Tino as he met his eye, there was a glittering irony in it that put Tino on edge. He no longer wanted to eat. Mike watched him push away his plate.

"What's wrong with the food?"

"Nothing. You go to hell."

"That's a nice answer to your host."

"I know just what kind of host you are."

Mike narrowed his eyes at him but didn't seem perturbed. He laughed. But now the din subsided as the dancers shuffled back to their seats, and he began to talk. He really set out to be amusing. Tino had often heard him speak of his past, but he'd never known Mike unfold as he did now. He had worked all over Europe, he had seen things that were denied most people and he had a way of describing them that made your eyes start out of your head. He had such a puckish way of looking at things. Every experience was grist for his mill; he

saw people in a ribald cynical light and when he told them of some of the characters he'd met in circuses and music-halls, you had to stop eating and hang on his words. Even Rosa cackled. He was impossible! When his stories were a bit off-colour she slapped him, but all the same she flung back her head and roared. You couldn't help it; he had only to describe some simple incident that happened in a bedroom and you knew that he'd already looked under the bed and found a lover there. "Buffoon!" cried Rosa. "You oughtn't to be trusted out!" How much of it all was true, Tino couldn't guess, but if it was a man's ambition to fill his little life on earth with excitement, Mike hadn't fallen far short of that aim. He had hoboed. He had been in America and travelled underneath railway trucks. He had been in gaol for vagrancy and he had been presented with some minor Balkan order by a king. ("I pawned it next day. By golly, the damned thing didn't fetch more than the price of a meal!") He had seen all the jealousies and fits of temperament of circus performers and he had not been unconnected with many of them. He admitted jubilantly that he'd once had to run for his life. ("It was here in Marseilles. Aristide hid me in this café for a week. I wasn't afraid of the woman's husband, he was only a damned juggler, but he was looking for me with an axe—he'd have hit me first and asked questions afterwards. Anyway, he only spoke Greek. I didn't see how I could argue my way out of a fix like that!") Aristide, the *patron*, had come over and was listening with gleaming mirthful eyes. He bore this story out.

"A mountain of a Greek! Only Mike was wrong about the axe. He had no axe."

"He hadn't?" cried Mike.

"No. Only a razor. And the funny thing is, I don't believe Mike ever really put a finger on the damn fool's wife."

Sarah spoke softly, "How do you know?"

"Because Mike doesn't like women. It's my opinion he only started it to annoy the Greek."

Sarah looked up into Mike's face. He gave her a bland smile. He had the face of a satyr again.

Yes, he was a wonderful host. When he set out to entertain

you, there was no one like him for making you feel that you were having a marvellous time. He dominated the table. In the vicinity, people were grinning; Mike's flaming hair was beginning to take all eyes. The men at near-by tables leaned a little closer to hear, they had caught snatches of the stories and were fascinated—and when one of their women chattered, her partner raised his hand as if to box her ears. And two of the "house" girls in their evening dresses—underneath which they wore nothing—came and sat near the table, listening unashamedly. As for Sarah, she seemed entranced. It puzzled Tino. If Mike had intended to get back at Sarah, to humiliate her in some cruel way, he wouldn't have expected him to go about it quite like this. He was treating her like a courtier. He couldn't have been more considerate with her if he tried. Indeed, it seemed to Tino that all these stories were primarily intended for her. And Sarah knew it: he was sure: she sat with her chin in her hand, her eyes on the table, now and again stealing a veiled look at Mike. But by now there was such a crowd round the table that Rosa had no room to eat.

At length,

"What the hell's all this?" cried Mike. "Beat it."

The invaders grinned and drifted back to their seats. Mike looked at the two "house" girls. "What do you want?"

One of the girls smiled. She was young and pretty. Her small breasts, her soft limbs, stood out underneath her dress.

"Come over to my table and have a drink."

"I've got a drink."

"I'll buy you a better one. You don't need to spend any money on me. Everything'll be for love."

Mike chuckled roughly and waved the girl away. She went. Now Mike leaned back, sweating. "I'm dry from talking. Tino, give Sarah a dance."

She didn't seem eager to leave, but when Tino smiled at her she rose and went with him to the floor. They danced in silence for a while. Tino began chaffingly,

"Well, it isn't so bad as you thought."

"No. Not so bad."

"But I'm sorry he had to bring you here."

Then she surprised him.

"What's wrong with it?"

He flitted his glance around with a twinkle.

"Well, you don't need me to tell you what kind of joint this is."

"What do I care? I like it. It makes your blood go faster." She flung back her head and, with sparkling eyes, looked at him antagonistically. "What does it matter what sort of people they are? At least, they're not insignificant. They're vital! As if they've just sprung out of the primitive earth. You can feel the heat coming out of them. They live every minute of their lives to the full!"

Underneath her thin dress he could feel her shoulders trembling. He pushed her back to stare at her curiously. Then suddenly, with a restless shrug, she stopped dancing.

"Oh, I don't want to dance any more. Let's go back!"

They returned. Mike raised his eyebrows at Sarah.

"That was quick."

"I don't care for the band."

Mike's mouth twitched.

"When I had the two feet God gave me they used to say I was a very good dancer. I'd never have let any girl take me off the floor like that."

She said softly, "I can well believe that of you, too."

But now their attention was distracted by a sudden burst of clapping that broke out in the café. A woman had come out from behind the band. She wore a dress of a harsh red silk with a fringed shawl of the same colour, and there was a high comb in her hair with a lace mantilla. She was no longer young, her face was lined and swarthy, but her roving black eyes had an ageless shine. A guitar was slung around her neck. She dismissed the band with a jerk of her head and, touching the guitar strings idly, began to sing. It was in Spanish. She wandered amongst the tables as she sang. What exactly she sang about, Tino could not tell: but the burden of it was clear. And soon many of the men began to sit up with an eager stir. Her voice was rasping and metallic, it was not pleasing, but it held you; it had the Spanish way of flattening on the high

notes with a thin trill that moved the hairs on your spine. It was about love. Not the love of soft summer nights and kindly moons, but the passion that tore at you and robbed you of your senses. Soon her face was glistening, and her eyes were hot; the song told you of nights on the hillside with her lover, the sheep drifted on the slopes, but she and her man lay there clutched tight while she gave herself with abandon to the storm that convulsed them both. She recollected its savagery, its ecstasy—and then her song grew fervent as if she were describing how she had been spurned when he had enough. It ended with a wild throb and a plonk of the strings. "*Murieron!*" Tino knew enough Spanish to guess that it meant grimly that someone had died. There was a roar of applause. She laughed all over her haggard olive-skinned face, showing her strong white teeth. Then her eyes fell on Mike. She paused strangely. Her face seemed intent: she gave a short laugh. Then she came over to the table and sat. She clapped her hand on Mike's shoulder familiarly.

"Well, Mike? I never expected to see you again!"

"Hullo, Pepita."

"For the love of God, give me a drink, my throat is parched."

She took his glass, filled it and drank.

"How long's it been?"

"Long enough."

"Look at my face and see how true it is. You forgot me, eh? Ruffian that you are!

"No one could forget you as long as you sing like that."

She looked at him with a penetrating stare in which there was a spark of feeling you could not fail to understand: if he had said a single indiscreet word to her she would have dashed the glass in his face, but if he'd beckoned his head to the stairs she would have gone with him like a lamb. She laughed begrudgingly.

"I never forgot you, either."

Then she threw a disinterested glance at the others. Rosa she fleetingly dismissed; but Tino held her eyes for a moment. "There's a handsome boy. He's nice."

"He is, isn't he?" grinned Mike.

"Better-looking than you, scoundrel." But she touched Mike's hand. "Oh, I wept when you left me! Well, what's gone is gone. You can't blow cold ashes into fire." Now she stared at Sarah. She scanned her face. Then jerking her head at her, she gave a quick look at Mike.

"So this is your new girl, eh?"

"No."

"Who're you trying to fool?"

"My poor deluded Pepita," he mocked, "you don't know what you're talking about. She can't stand the sight of me."

"D'you think I'm crazy? The girl's madly in love with you."

An odd chill came over Tino's skin. It seemed to him that the heated din of the café died out of his ears: he heard the Spanish woman laugh raucously as she patted Sarah's hand. "I envy you. You'll know what it is to suffer, but you'll never want to forget a moment of it. Oh, I know him!" The men in the café were shouting for her to return, her eyes lit up and she shrugged. "Well, at least, one can always sing. Be quiet, idiots!" she called out to them. She drained the glass. Then she leaned over and pressed a kiss on Mike's lips. "*Vaya Usted con Dios!* Go with God."

She laughed again and swung away, already plucking at the guitar strings.

As she wandered about the café, singing, Tino's eyes were on Mike's face. He may not have been aware of Tino's stare, he seemed only languidly interested in following the Spanish singer with a remote smile. He lay back in his chair, his hands thrust in his pockets. But Tino knew that he was conscious of his rage. Mike's indifference made him gasp. Then he looked at Sarah. Now he could not stir. She, too, was staring at Mike. But her eyes were terrified. She was unnaturally pale. Tino scraped with his chair to stand up as a spurt of uncontrollable anger took him, but he felt Rosa's hand slide on his under the table and press him down. Tino sank back.

The song ended. The woman waved her guitar on high and disappeared from whence she had come. Immediately, the band struck up a fox-trot. A crowd of men and girls

moved to the floor. Rosa said hurriedly, "Tino, let's dance."

"No."

"You mustn't neglect me. Come on."

He got up and went with her to the floor. He barely followed the music with his steps.

"Don't look like that," she whispered. "You should see your face. It's a rough joint, this. There are plenty here who wouldn't mind a fight."

"Why did Mike bring Sarah here?"

She flitted an uneasy glance at him.

"Can't you guess?"

"I'm asking you."

"To arouse her, of course. Oh, he's a smart one, that Mike!"

"What the devil d'you mean?"

"To you she's crystal-clear. Like a brook. Eh? As natural as a wildflower? Yes? Well, what you don't know is that underneath is a very passionate girl that has never been touched. Oh, she gives herself in love! But it's with all the simplicity of a child. It means nothing. She's never been awakened. In a place like this, Mike could stir in her what is waiting to be stirred. He's observant. The monster. He knows better than you what lies in her heart."

"But she hates him."

"Fool. How thin is the hair that divides love from hate?"

Tino's muscles were jerking. His face was hot.

"Why's he doing it?"

And here she laughed wryly. "Oddly enough, because he's fond of you. He doesn't want her to break the two of you up."

"I'll kill him."

"Believe me, you wouldn't be the first that's tried."

Then she shook him: he didn't seem to be listening. She whispered earnestly:

"Take her away from the circus. At once. D'you hear? Never mind Pat! If you love her, go away with her. She knew what might happen. She was frightened. That was why she wanted you to go."

"All right."

And Tino stared back at the table. He saw that both Mike

and Sarah were leaning forward, he was talking hurriedly and she was listening without a move. He saw her profile only fleetingly, the dancers swung in between: but he had the feeling that her eyes were distended: then Mike put his hands on hers, she let them lie there for a moment, then broke away with her head bent.

"I've had enough," said Tino. "We've got to go."

He pushed his way back to the table. He said harshly, "Sarah, we're going."

She nodded. Mike was unperturbed, though his face was flushed.

"What's the hurry?"

"You can stay. Rosa, take Sarah's coat."

Mike laughed, shouted for Aristide and, as Tino took Sarah's arm and led her to the door, paid the bill. They went out into the street and moved quickly along. Sarah was quiet. Soon they heard Mike's crutch tapping behind. He did not catch them up until they got near the quays. They climbed into the truck without a word. Tino drove off.

They were silent throughout the journey. Rosa played nervously with the hem of her coat. Sarah might have been made of stone. If Mike had so much as opened his mouth, Tino would have stopped the truck and had it out with him there and then; his fingers shook on the wheel; but Mike only whistled softly and sometimes tapped a light rhythm with his crutch on the floor of the cab. Thus they got back to the camp. They climbed out of the truck. Mike swung off towards the caravans immediately, not giving any of them another glance. When the three reached the girls' caravan, Rosa muttered and hurried inside. Tino paused. He felt weary. He did not know what to say. Then suddenly, catching sight of Sarah's strained face in the starlight, a wave of compassion took him; he put his arms around her to kiss her good night. It may have been only a chance movement, but her mouth evaded his and his lips brushed only her cheek. She slipped out of his arms and ran inside.

He went back to his caravan. Mike was undressing. Tino said nothing until he was in his bunk and Mike leaned over

to blow out the lamp. Then he stretched out his hand.

"Wait."

Mike yawned.

"I'm tired. Go to sleep."

"What are you up to with Sarah?"

The bunk creaked as Mike made himself comfortable. He said lazily, "Oh, Rosa's been talking, has she? You don't want to listen to her."

"I'm warning you, Mike. Leave Sarah alone."

"Why, I thought it was a rattling good party. I didn't notice anything wrong." But Mike's eyes shone on Tino ironically. "If you think she's so much in love with you, what are you worried about?"

"You ought to know."

"Me? I don't even know what you mean. I told you she'd turn out a headache, didn't I? But you had to go against me. You had to drag her in." Mike laughed softly. "Women! You don't know how faithless they are! Now shut up, will you? I want to get some sleep."

And with that, he blew out the lamp.

VI

All night it rained. Tino lay awake for some time, listening to the beat of it on the caravan roof. When he awoke in the morning, a high wind had sprung up; it howled softly, and the rain, coming out of a grey sky in sheets, lashed at the windows. Through them, dimly, he saw the meadow shining like a swamp. Mike had been up some while and was dressed. He was leaving.

"I've had enough," he said roughly. "I've got to clear out for a bit."

"Where are you going?"

"Into the town. If I don't, I'll burst. Tell Pat I won't be on to-night."

Tino did not need to look at Mike's face twice to know that one of his outbreaks was due: he recognised the signs. He shrugged.

"You're being a fool."

"That's my affair."

"When will you be back?"

"When you see me."

And saying nothing more, Mike pushed out and splashed across the field. Soon he was lost in the rain.

It was an uneasy breakfast in the tent. Everything was sodden, you felt that you would never get dry, and the heavy patter on the canvas dinned into your head. Soon, most of the artistes were fretful. They sat with ears cocked up. Sarah was there, but she did not lift her eyes. And from the impatient way Rosa was looking at her, her mouth set sullenly, Tino gathered that they'd already exchanged hard words. Sarah left quickly without a glance at Tino and when Rosa met his eye she merely lifted her shoulders. It said: Sarah's in a difficult mood. Then everybody talked about the rain. It was no joke, if it went on like this the pitch would be a morass and soon they would have to start digging ditches to drain the tents. Wallowing about in that muck! Damn it, swore Chang. Was this weather? Louie shook his head. From the look of the sky, he didn't think there'd be a performance to-night.

It worsened by midday. The wind blew the rain very nearly horizontal and presently Louie had to call on some of the men to help him tighten the guy ropes of the Big Top. The canvas was beginning to flap in the fretful gusts with harsh metallic cracks. They went, cursing softly. The mood in the field wasn't lightened when one of the elephants began to trumpet unhappily.

"It'll get worse before it's better," Louie cheered the men.

But Chang growled. The damp was seeping into Chiki's arthritic bones; another bronchial attack might easily carry the tiger off. They could hear him coughing softly in his tent.

"He's an old fool, but I've had him a long time. You get attached to the beasts." They were all surprised to see tears in Chang's eyes. "Poor creature. He won't see another winter through!"

Now there was little they could do but watch the dismal sky, across the greyness of which scudded wind-torn clouds. And

the tents sagged under the overbearing weight of the rain. It hammered at them: the Big Top shivered and swayed like an ungainly monster in pain. It was an abominable onslaught. The ground grew more and more waterlogged and by the middle of the afternoon a great pool had spread around the end of the field where the caravans were grouped. They began to tilt slightly as the wheels sank; in a little while one or two of them were up to the axle-bars in mud. If they waited much longer they would not get them out. When Pat Chantry shouted to the men, they donned oilskins and tumbled out; a grim glowering mood had overtaken them. Temperamental as they were, vacillating fitfully from mirth to dejection, this unending deluge dispirited them. They detested nature—they bore its harassments with sullen despair. Soon they were plastered with the pale yellow mud. And it was no longer amusing to put up with the jokes some of the clowns were cracking; Chang lifted his arm savagely to Beppo and told him to shut his trap before he closed it for him; the grim hiss of the rain on the soggy earth was infecting them all. The women watched the vans sucking out of the mud. And the children cried. When the caravans had been placed where the ground was higher, the whole company made for the changing tent and there, careless of sex, stripped naked and washed themselves down. They gathered for hot coffee; Judith had got a fire burning at last.

Tino looked about for Sarah. There was no sign of her. He thought she must be sleeping in the caravan; after all, there wasn't much she could do and she would hardly be used to predicaments like this. But he yearned to comfort her. How distressing it must be for her to look out of the caravan window and see the vista of mud that surrounded them! He laughed wryly. Probably, circus life didn't seem glamorous to her any more. When he had had his coffee, he edged over to Rosa and whispered, "Where's Sarah?" but impatiently she twitched her head. She had her ear cocked to the stable tents—she was worried about her frail Lippizan that must be up to its hocks in water now. So he joined Judith. They sat quietly in the corner and sipped their coffee.

Now he began to think. He had had so little time since he awoke to put his mind to things: it seemed to him that, of a sudden, events were racing along. He had the feeling that he was no more than a spectator now, a part of his life was slipping out of his fingers and there was simply nothing he could do: nothing. What had been started amongst them at that café last night? Sarah's face, haunted by what the Spanish singer had said to her (and wasn't it damned nonsense?) gave him a qualm. He couldn't understand it! It wasn't simply her detestation of Mike—all of them accepted it as naturally as you did Mike's flaming red hair—no, there'd been a real undercurrent of tension at the table, something dreadful: Rosa had felt it: and again and again Sarah's spasmodic terror returned to him. What had got into her? He would get nothing out of Mike. But something had overcome him, too, he hadn't gone out on one of his berserk rampages for nothing. Yet he felt no more fury with Mike: only an intense dismay. They had grown together too closely for him not to feel instinctively the big Irishman's shocking unease. Vaguely, in the night, he'd heard him stirring, neither of them had got much sleep, and Mike's face this morning had been drawn. Mike! They were so attached to each other, it was madness to let matters drift to a break like this. Well, wherever he was now—in some filthy *bistro* or brothel—perhaps he was relieving his turbulent emotions. Tino smiled faintly. If he didn't turn up in a day or two, he and a few of the men would have to scour the town and find him, wan but assuaged, and drag him back. Odd, wasn't it?—to think of the way, so frequently, he had to father that tormented man!

He glanced at Judith. She met his eyes. And then—quite curiously—it came over him impulsively how much truer happiness he got with her. It touched him with gratitude—she didn't tear at his heart, he never suffered with her a moment of the poignant distress Sarah gave him; you couldn't sit with Judith for five minutes without feeling a warm sense of companionship and comfort stealing over you. Unthinkingly, he put out his hand to hers. And he whispered:

"Mike's off on the loose again."

"Where?"

"God knows. You know what he's like. He's got himself worked up into one of his states."

"Have you told Dad?"

"No."

She looked up. He followed her eyes; they listened to the drum-beat of the rain on the canvas roof.

She said thoughtfully, "There won't be a show to-night. I don't think Dad needs to know until he's got to. It'd just about finish him with Mike."

Then she looked at Tino with a compassionate smile.

"But I'm so sorry for you!"

"Good lord, why?"

"Well, having to dig him out of the beastly places he gets to. It must disgust you."

And she shook her head. She seemed puzzled.

"I don't know what holds you together! You're so unlike!"

And it was a fact, he couldn't have explained it if he'd tried. But the affinity was there: it had surmounted all Mike's rages, his fitful spasms of despair and debauchery (and Tino's own failings, no doubt!). For his part, he could only believe that the big hollow-faced Irishman touched some chord of protectiveness inside him; not many knew what internal strains Mike so savagely forced upon himself—you had to see him when he came back from his outbreaks, shaken and pale; then his red hair gave his transparent skin a childlike feebleness, and, relieved of his passions, there was a strange spiritual nobility about his ugliness. He had purged himself of the outrages of his flesh, he no longer suffered its insistent demands and he was at peace again. Then there was no sweeter companion than Mike! The sensuality that so marked his features became benevolent, he was like one of those ancient gods you saw hacked out of stone by primitive peoples: he had that brooding agelessness, and you felt that in him there was being resolved, with greater fury than in most, the battle between the flesh and the spirit that for ever was to plague all men. Then, nobody knew how kind he could be, how patient! All he'd done for Tino, the hours of training and encouragement he'd devoted to

him—all had sprung from that innate affection. Analyse it? Why? It was there! They belonged together. You could stretch those silken bonds, but they would never break. And whatever Mike found in Tino, it seemed to be enough. Vaguely, Tino felt that the crippled Irishman saw in his slim youthful grace the whole body he, too, had had. And they were happy together. He asked himself: what more could two such dissimilar men demand? Like Mike, he was content.

So, smiling to himself, all he said was, "We get along. I won't leave him. I don't think he'd ever want to leave me."

"But doesn't it seem horrible to you when you find him—in those dreadful places? When you know what he's just been through?"

"No."

"Greater love hath no man."

Tino chuckled.

"I wouldn't put it quite like that."

(He supposed it was hard for a woman to understand. He wouldn't enlighten her. When David said of Jonathan, "Very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women," he came out with something that had left women in all ages aghast.)

So the day wore on. He didn't see Sarah again. She did not turn up for meals. He was half-tempted to go across to her caravan, then decided that it would be better to let her be. When the weather lifted, she might be more like herself. For this downpour really cast a gloom on all their spirits. Inside the Big Top, the clay and sawdust of the ring made a grey patina of slime. The rain, driven like needles by the wind, found every crevice in the caravans; neither fires nor shutters could keep it out. At times the wind fell as if muffled by a blanket, at others it rose with a sharp scream, like an angry woman's cry; and then everything in Tino's caravan jangled and shook. Exactly as if one of the elephants had pressed his broad rump against the side of it!—the blasting gusts had the same irresistible push. And through his window Tino saw Pat Chantry and Louie go plodding out in oilskins anxiously. The Big Top, wallowing in moisture, tugged at the shrunken guy

ropes; it was a moot point whether the anchor irons would hold. How long, anyway, could this fiendishness go on?

It grew dark. Tino, still thinking of Sarah, fell asleep with the shutters rattling in the tumult. He did not know how long he had slept when he sat up with a jerk: instantly he was awake. Every hooter in the trucks was roaring away. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was three-thirty and pitch-dark, and dragged on his clothes. He went out in his oilskins and was met by a gust that very nearly blew him back. It was wicked. It screeched. Now they were in for it with a vengeance, this was the kind of gale circus managers had nightmares about. The klaxons went on hooting madly, summoning the men. Tino saw that some of the trucks had been turned so that their headlights shone on the tents; the rain, blown flat across the field, was like glittering stripes in the beams. In the inky pall, Tino could see the hurricane lamps bobbing and figures running towards the tents. He ran after them through the clinging mud.

As he drew nearer, he saw Pat Chantry, dripping, pointing to the menagerie tent and shouting: but so violent was the din, his words might have been torn from his lips by the wind; Tino could not catch what he said. But he guessed. A tent squad had been mustered by Louie, some in their underclothes—so wet that further covering would have been absurd—and they were seizing axes and sledge-hammers from out of the trucks. He glimpsed Judith: her face, glistening with rain, was white and scared. But she laughed helplessly to him as he found an axe.

"Let me come with you," she cried.

He shook his head. She repeated it in his ear.

He shouted, "You can't do anything."

"I can't just stand about."

Then she took his arm and they ran towards the menagerie tent. Lit by crossbars of light from the trucks, a mere glance told them that it could not stand long. The bunting flaps, ripped to shreds, soared in the wind stiffly, like banners. There were cracking noises. A guy rope snapped, coiled by Beppo's startled face with a sound like a whip, and the tent

gave a lurch. It could have been a gruesome dream. The men's faces, blank and desperate in the headlights, dripped; they hacked at the débris, freeing it, then the elephants were led out, lumbering at a trot, trumpeting away. Their great pads slithered in the mud. They were hobbled some distance off, and when Tino looked round, he saw the great hulks, standing plaintively in the dim light, their rough hides washed with rain. He saw Chiki crouching in the corner of his cage—he lay still, cowed forlornly by the gusts that were slapping at him through the rents in the tent. Then the tent seemed to slip. A gap appeared in the side; it was blown clean through and the remaining poles snapped like sticks. Tino pushed Judith clear. They tore the fragments loose and watched the remnants of the tent whisked like chaff across the field until they flew out of sight.

From the stable tent Rosa was leading out the first of the horses. Her hair was plastered like a black skin on her head. With Tino and Judith at her heels she took out the animals in pairs, running them across the field to where Chang, his naked chest leaping with bunched muscles as he wielded a sledge-hammer in the odd light, was banging tethering irons into the ground; Chang bared his teeth at them in a mirthless laugh. Tino felt Judith's hand on his arm. Her golden hair, torn loose from its scarf, streamed straight from her head.

"It *hates* us," she cried.

But it was at the Big Top that most of the men fought. There could be no question of letting it go; and a gang of them were hammering in the loosened anchors while others strained at the ropes. And from the great tent, swaying and shuddering, there came a peculiar half-human noise: you heard it more clearly inside, sheltered from the pervading wind: it was compounded of creaking iron masts, flapping canvas and aching poles. Every wild gust that took the huge sides made them belly until you felt that the canvas must burst. The water washed from the roof in a deluge and swathed the ground. Pat worked with the men, he and Louie were ready with spare ropes when now and again, a guy snapped with a crack; the danger lay in the wicked thongs curling back: if they

caught you they could strip your flesh to the bone. As for Tino, he and the Orientals—the Jap springboard tumblers—shinned up the iron masts within, lashing the crossbars. It was probable that the Orientals were the least perturbed in the field; as they swarmed up, Tino heard them calling to each other brightly in their own high-pitched lisping tongue. And then they slid swiftly to the ground.

For it seemed now that the climax of the storm had come. It arrived with a shriek and a flurry of wind that solidly buffeted everyone. The tension in the air hung, you seemed to feel the atmosphere, sultry and raging, stretch like rubber: in that fiendish instant, the drops spattered your face and hurt like rods. They leaned against it. And then they all shouted, uselessly, but as if pinning their voices against the din in animal despair. All saw what happened next. Suddenly there was a sensation of suction, as if in the sky there had been a monstrous sucking in of breath: they saw the roof of the Big Top leap up and billow. Poles and cross-bars snapped and the iron masts gave audible squeaks. They leaped back. The great tent seemed blown like a bubble with air and the bursting flaps went standing out. Tino thought incredulously, "It's going to explode." Then a roof section slit: a segment of the canvas went flapping up into the sky, tore to ribbons, and in that instant there was a deadly quiet.

They heard nothing but the hiss of the rain; then even that died and they stood, waiting. Nothing came. The storm was done.

Pat came up. He was appallingly shaken. It was a measure of their astonishment that when they heard his voice—the first they had caught—they all jumped.

He cried, "By God, that was close."

Chang threw down his sledge-hammer and began to cry.

Louie capered with relief. In his clown's costume, he did not look more fantastic than he did now; his eyes shone through a pale yellow encrustation of mud; only his bald head, revealed as he slipped off his sou'wester, was incredibly pink.

"Another minute and we'd have had it all over our heads!"

There was little more they could do. What débris there was

in the field could only be cleared when it was light. They loitered a few minutes longer to see if the gale would recur: then, miraculously it seemed, the frayed harassed-looking clouds showed a glimmer of moon. It had blown itself out.

The changing tent had withstood it. The menagerie tent was gone, but the stables, with patching, would soon be put right. And though the Big Top, the father of all, had come near to being blown out of the field, it was still with them: a sodden shaking mammoth. It was now nearly five, and still very dark. They washed perfunctorily. They were too clotted with mud to free themselves from it until everything was dry; then they sipped at the scalding tea the women brought round.

Pat came over to Tino, clutching his mug. He beamed.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine."

"Like a bad dream! By Christ, I won't forget to-night in a hurry. Mike all right?"

Tino, with his face deep in his mug, pretended not to hear.

But he chuckled to himself. Mike had been well out of it—there wasn't much he could have done, but it amused Tino to think of him stamping about, raging at the elements: Mike would have answered them back, roar for roar.

When they trooped out of the tent, the sky was lightening dimly. Sombre pink and amber fringes were creeping up in the east. The men yawned as they moved back to the caravans. The animals stood silently, as if, with a primitive expectancy, aware of the tremulous approach of dawn. The field could be made out darkly, littered with scraps of wreckage and rope; it was phenomenal to discover thin strips of canvas dangling from the trees. Tino didn't think it was worth going back to sleep. He walked back with Rosa.

But he had not seen Sarah. Of course, she was wise to have kept away. Unused to such emergencies, she would only have been flurried off her feet. Poor kid, she must be shuddering in her caravan now. By gum, he could swear she'd never been through anything like this!

"How's Sarah?" he asked.

He thought Rosa was too weary to talk. She merely shrugged.

"Is she upset?"

"How should I know?"

Now they were outside her caravan and Rosa stood on the steps glumly.

"Well," he said, "let's see." He thought her manner strange.

She stared at him.

"Go away!"

"What's wrong?"

She mumbled angrily: then burst out.

"She's not here."

"What?"

"She went into town this afternoon and she hasn't come back!"

He did not know what to do with his hands during the five minutes in which he sat on the edge of his bunk. All he had been through that night had left him bodily worn; what Rosa had told him was as staggering as a last punishing blow. Mike. Of course. She could be with nobody else. He had been so intent on her abhorrence of Mike, he had not been able to fit it into a larger relationship, as monstrous as it was convincing. You could simulate all the disbelief you wanted to: it was there: mocking you. It left him physically sick. At last, he wiped the palms of his hands and lay back on the bunk, closing his eyes.

He could guess now what had been plaguing her these last few weeks. Mingled with her detestation of Mike had always been a secret awareness of his sensual attraction. She sought to thrust it away, but it would not be dispelled. She had nothing but horror for him—but when on the rare occasions Mike touched her with his strong sinewy hands, so supple, with their animal coating of soft red hair, she had to tremble: she did not know what was the matter with her. And up on the pedestal sometimes, in the glare of the lights, his warm body brushed hers—and then who knew what angry yearnings flitted through her mind? She had half expressed it herself when she burst out with fear that he must have cloven hooves —she must have felt like a defenceless creature in the woods

when a satirical face with its goat horns stared at her through the trees. She hated his arrogance, every insult he paid her was like a knife in her heart: but it fascinated her. His blatant contempt for her made her writhe. But when the Spanish singer, wise in her sex, had stared into her face and divined the truth, she had merely voiced the shameful secret Sarah had been afraid to face.

He could remember how the blood had drained from her features. She'd been terrified. She knew then that Mike had only to lift his little finger and she would come.

Tino's head ached as though it had been banged. He watched the light growing through the curtains. When the first rays of the sun crept in, he got up. It was now about six o'clock. He washed his hot face, cleaning himself as best he could. He left the camp and went out on to the road. He knew that there was an early bus for workmen into Marseilles.

When he reached the city, he went straight down to the quays. He was near the *Cannebière*, from which branched the steep and crowded streets that the sailors thronged. It was the old quarter. It was hard to know where to start looking for Mike. The streets were thick with shabby *bistros* and seedy little hotels; in any one of them Mike and Sarah might have met. Mike knew every ugly haunt around. Then, staring across the harbour, sprinkled with diamonds by the morning sun, Tino thought suddenly of the place Mike had taken them to the other night. Aristide's café. He remembered that Mike had gone there for refuge when the outraged Greek husband had been after him. It was the sort of place to which Mike might instinctively go. But the idea revolted him! It was hardly more than a brothel: a house of assignation. He couldn't believe that even Mike would dare to take Sarah there. Still, Aristide might know where he was. Mike might have gone in last night for a drink. It was a starting point, at least.

He went down the *Boulevard des Dames* and found the narrow street they had passed down the other night. Then, garishly lit, with that brooding sense of lust pervading it, it had had a sinister beauty of its own. Now it looked merely sordid. The leaning houses peeled. The curtains still fluttered, but

behind them the rooms seemed dank. It reminded you of a slattern who does not care what she looks like in the morning: and her body, which last night obsessed you, now only fills you with disgust. They were cleaning out the drinking places, and the shopkeepers, the horse-butchers, and *pâtissiers*, were sweeping the refuse across the pavement. Tino found Aristide's café, pushed open the door and went in. Waiters in shirt-sleeves were collecting empty bottles and glasses and sweeping up the cigarette butts that had been crushed on the floor. He picked out Aristide at once. In a green apron, his powerful arms bare, he was wiping glasses behind the bar. It struck Tino with some force: his naked face had the veiled cynicism of a dissolute priest. A cigarette end, infinitesimally small, clung to his lip. He gave Tino a wrinkled look of doubt as he came in, then immediately recognised him. His head moved instinctively to the side door Tino had seen the girls frequent the previous night.

"You're early, *Monsieur*."

"You remember me, don't you?"

"Of a surety. You were here with the Irishman only the other night."

"I'm looking for him."

"Indeed?"

Tino knew at once that Mike was here; but Aristide went on busily polishing glasses and smiled.

"It's a little soon for a drink but we can oblige you. What will you have?"

"No. Take me to Mike."

"He is not here, *Monsieur*."

"Did he come here last night?"

"Now you are asking me something. We always have such a crowd." He turned to a waiter. "Georges, was that red Mike here last night? But, of course! For a moment, no more! He had a few drinks. Didn't he return to your camp? No? You should try the hotels." He shrugged. "How should I know where he slept?"

Tino turned as if to go: then moved swiftly to the side door leading to the stairs. He heard Aristide give an angry ex-

clamation, but before he could slip past the bar Tino was through it. He saw two of the "house" girls, in shabby wrappers, with loosened hair, coming downstairs. They gave him a negligent look, then he heard a rattle of plates from behind a door across the hall. The girls went inside. He followed them quickly. Mike was sitting at a table, breakfasting. He was alone. He looked up. He saw Tino. He smiled.

"Sit down," he beckoned cheerfully. "Just in time for a spot of food."

Then Aristide came in hurriedly behind and Mike waved him away with his head.

"He had no right to force his way in," Aristide burst out. "He should have taken my word!"

"He's my pal."

Aristide shrugged irritably.

"You said no one was to disturb you."

"He's different. Fetch him a plate."

Aristide left. The girls, who had seated themselves, chattering, took no notice of this outburst, they were evidently used to trouble with men. They had *croissants* on their plates and began to pour out coffee for their breakfast; but when Mike looked at them and pointed to the door they scowled, began to argue, then thought better of it as they stared at his face. They picked up their food and cups sulkily and went. Aristide had returned with a plate and cutlery for Tino and he followed them out.

"They give you a darn good breakfast here," said Mike.

"I don't want anything. You knew I'd find you here, didn't you?"

Mike nodded calmly.

"You were bound to tumble to it. Though I didn't expect you so soon.

"Where's Sarah?"

Mike gave him a stealthy, yet unperturbed look.

"Upstairs."

"You swine."

"Oh, get some food down you, old boy, and to hell with all that."

Tino had begun to tremble again. He found his voice. "Why did you do it?"

Mike smiled mockingly. "Why don't you ask Sarah?"

"She never had a chance."

"Maybe there's something in that." Then, perhaps, seeing Tino's emotion, Mike dropped his bantering tone. He said, leaning forward intently, "Look here. I don't want you to be hurt."

"Didn't it mean anything to you that I loved her?"

"Eh? You'll get over it."

"She loved me."

"Oh, that!" Mike laughed. "It was just the whim of a child. Sheer good-nature. I knew it was me she wanted all the time."

"I've got to see her."

Indifferently, Mike said, "Suit yourself."

He went to the stairs and called up, "Sarah." He sat. A few moments passed, they heard soft steps on the stairs, then Sarah came in. She wore the faded robe she used for her performances. It was not difficult to see that she wore nothing underneath. Her hair was loosely bound. She looked warm from the pillow, her eyes sparkled. But she stopped abruptly as she set eyes on Tino and paled a little; as quickly her face flamed. Then she looked down obstinately.

"You shouldn't have come here."

"I had to find out."

Her mouth grew set.

"What business is it of yours? I'm my own mistress. I know what I'm doing."

"I wasn't terribly sure."

And Tino stared. As he looked at her shabby wrapper, at the coils of her hair, so carelessly put up, he was reminded with horror of the "house" girls who had just come down: she looked exactly like them. It cut him to the heart. If he'd stayed the night there casually, like any of the ravenous sailors, seeking relief from abstinence after a long voyage, and seen her with the others he would never have distinguished her; it made his eyes smart poignantly to see her standing there, so unaware of it. And then she did a thing that made

him sigh. She went across to Mike possessively and sat close by him, nestling her hand in his.

"It's no use any more. You can see for yourself!"

"You could have told me."

"D'you think I knew myself? Let me be. Where Mike goes, I go. I'll never leave him now."

"You can't guess what that's going to mean."

Her eyes glowed.

"Do you think I care? I love him," she cried. "Don't you understand? I love him! I don't care what he does to me. He can beat me. Leave me. He's mine. I belong to him. Now you know it, why don't you go away?"

Mike had been eating inattentively, but now he had begun to fidget. He put down his knife and fork with a gesture and said to Sarah shortly, "I've got to talk to Tino. You go up."

"No. I want to be here."

"Do as I tell you."

She paused. Then, her voice yielding meekly, she said, "All right."

Tino heard the sound of her kiss; then her soft steps as, quietly, she went. When the door closed, Mike leaned over brusquely.

"Now listen to me. I know what you're thinking. All right. That's how it started off. I couldn't bear her mixing in between us. When I knew how she felt about me, I made her want me. Made her! D'you hear? I meant to show you she couldn't stick to you, not to any man. I wanted to get rid of her. Well, it hasn't turned out quite like that." Mike gave a strange laugh. "I'm in love with her."

"You?"

"By God," said Mike violently, "d'you think I don't hate her for it?"

"You're not sane."

"You're telling me, I'm not. She's got me. Body and soul. Caught on my own hook." Mike made a savage sound. "I don't possess myself any more. She's taken away my self-control. Damn her. I won't forgive her for that."

Mike wiped his glistening face. And though he found it hard

to express himself, Tino knew well what he was trying to say. It would have been just like Mike to think he could put a spoke in her wheel; jealous of her influence, the moment he'd sensed the troubled attraction he had for her, he'd seized his chance. Of course, he didn't care a hoot what happened to her! Damn it, he must have thought, it only served her right! And probably it wasn't unmixed with a bit of physical craving: much as he resented her, he wouldn't have been flesh and blood not to think of her fresh beauty and the touch of her soft body in his arms. But now that he'd played his hand, it hadn't come off. Satiated, he couldn't dismiss her. He was in love. It must have shocked him inexpressibly. He found himself tied to her with bonds of yearning he couldn't shake off. Oh, she thought she possessed him! she didn't know that he looked on her with horror; he would hate her all the more for having got such a grip on him. When they lay together after their passion, she content, he was only furious; he would only want to be free of her, to recover his arrogant self-control. He wasn't capable of the unselfish instincts of a lover: it was only lust: letch. And sooner or later, he'd conquer it and, with relief, throw her off. What would he care about her then? But for Sarah, it would be the end of the world. She would go through hell. Mike was capable of incredible brutality to anyone who earned his contempt. And there was nothing Tino could do. Nothing. One look at Sarah's face told him that.

Mike knew what he was thinking: he gave a drawn smile. He touched Tino's hand.

"So long as it doesn't interfere with us."

He was outrageous. Tino got up.

"We're through."

Mike looked alarmed.

"What d'you mean?"

"I'll talk to Pat. We'll finish the performances to the end of the week. Then I'm getting out."

Mike stumbled up. He couldn't get his words out quick enough.

"Don't do that. For God's sake. She doesn't matter, I'll shake it off, when it's over we'll be together again.

You know what you mean to me."

"Take your hands off me."

Mike's face was harassed, he was astonishingly pale. He shouted, "You're crazy."

Tino bit his lip. He was getting hot and shaken again. "D'you think I'd forgive you for fetching her here? You've got no damned feelings. Degrading her like this."

"Oh, don't be so blasted noble. She isn't worth it, you fool."

A shock of rage suffused Tino, Mike's angry cynical features swam in his eyes and with all his strength he dashed his fist into his face. Mike staggered back, his hand seeking wildly for the balance of his crutch; his chair went over with a crash. Even in that instant, he looked so helpless, a pang of regret smote Tino's heart, he wanted to reach out and hold him up; but Mike fell back against the wall, cursing. His eyes blazed. He swung back his crutch like a flail. Then he dropped it; he flushed darkly and put his hand up to his face. He laughed.

"I nearly let you have it then. Now get out. Get out."

Tino went.

When he got back to the camp, the meadow was a hive of activity. The women were stitching the canvas sides and Louie was somewhere on the top of the big tent, patching away. Nobody remarked on Tino's absence and silently he joined Beppo at the trucks. All morning, all afternoon, the clank of sledge-hammers resounded in the field. The sun had brought a new mood. Tino saw Rosa looking at him peculiarly; she seemed about to come over and talk to him, but apparently thought better of it. What was done was done. So they worked through the afternoon, then, not wishing to overtax themselves for the night's show, threw down their tools at about four o'clock.

"Enough's enough," cried Pat. He was jubilant. "We've been damned lucky, boys!"

Tino rested on the steps of the caravan. He was glad nobody came over to talk to him; internally, he felt bruised. Then, about an hour later, he was astonished to see Sarah

crossing the field. She did not give him a glance. She went into her caravan. Tino knew that, although they had come back together, Mike had sent her on ahead not to invite comment.

But it was growing dark before Mike arrived. He came into the tent for supper. And from the look of him, who would have guessed that earlier he'd exhibited such violent emotion? He joked and chirruped, never lost for words. He sat in his usual place next to Tino, though he did not speak to him. Tino saw that where he had hit him his face was patchily flushed.

He was changing in the caravan when Mike came in. He, too, began to change silently. Tino felt that his sidelong eyes were examining him. Then, with a gesture of impatience, Mike began:

"I suppose you've thought over what you said about breaking up the act?"

"There wasn't any need to."

"You don't mean you're really leaving?"

"I am. I'll straighten it out with Pat."

"Would it make any difference if I asked you not to go?"

"No."

"All right, confound you. Please yourself."

Tino went into the gangway of the Big Top, passing Sarah, who averted her head. Mike was behind him. Judith touched his arm, whispering,

"What's wrong?"

"Why?"

"Well, your face is enough. And Mike looks like a fury."

"That's no novelty."

Then, so that he should not have to talk about it, he withdrew. He was a good deal more tired than he cared to be. All this damnable emotion had taken it out of him. Indeed, it was the first time his body had ever shrunk from the strenuous performance ahead. Soon, Chang's act approached its end, and as the band rose to its hectic pitch Tino swarmed up on to the pedestal, feeling the ladder shake as Mike and Sarah came up behind. Now they were pressed close together, waiting for the arc lights to come swinging up. At this point, Tino turned. He saw Mike's eyes glittering at him. And Sarah gave him a

sullen antagonistic look. Strange, wasn't it?—that a love, so ethereal in its way, so free and generous, should have turned, on his side to bitterness, on hers to angry hate. Then up came the limes, taking him full in the face. He adjusted his eyes to the glare. As the band broke into the strains of "*Libiamo*", Tino trod his feet into the resin and, timing his swing to the bars of the music, went into his first arc across the tent.

As he curled to his knees, inverted, he caught a glimpse of Sarah, sailing on her trapeze after him. Once they were up there, there was less time to think; and together they went through the opening routine. When he made the last swallow dart to her hands, he heard the first shouts of laughter; Mike had begun his bouncing on the wire. He coiled himself on the trapeze bar beside Sarah. They swung silently across the tent.

His arm across her back, gripping the rope, rested on her warm body. Her thighs were pressed intimately to his. Yet they might have been as remote as stars. He looked at her intensely; her hair floated in a soft cloud, her dark eyes were only on Mike. Certainly Mike's performance wasn't suffering to-night. He was taking more than his usual risks and getting away with them. Every step he made was clumsy, the red-headed madman, he slipped and tottered in his grotesque wig and "English sporting"; and the gales of laughter went ringing through the tent. Sarah sighed. Tino whispered to her, with a half-laugh, "Cheer up. No bones broken."

"Why did you hit Mike?"

He was really surprised.

"Don't your instincts tell you?"

"I'll never forgive you for it."

He did not speak to her any more.

Now it was time for Tino to start mixing in with Mike. They went through their routine with the headlong abandon that seemed to have so much effrontery, though God knew, every instant and move had been carefully judged. It put the crowd on edge: a fitful silence fell below. It was something to work with Mike, his strong hands were so sure, you felt such confidence in the man. Almost, Tino's old affection came rushing back to him. Ah, it was like old times now! He heard the

music harden its tempo, this was the moment when the strains of "*Libiamo*" always imprinted themselves on Tino's mind. He was ready now for the climax, the last jump to Mike's crutch that was so apt to make the crowd give that frightened wrenching sob. Mike prepared for it with his fall, ungainly to the eye, but sensitively timed: he swung on his trapeze and the moment was here: Tino leapt. He turned his double somersault and, exulting in its ease, went with that swallow-beat through the air for Mike's crutch. His fingers found it. In that instant, something of heart-thudding significance happened. They had done the act so often that every tiny movement was instinctive to him: and when, suddenly, staring up into Mike's inverted face, he felt the crutch twitch ever so slightly, yet spasmodically, in his hands, he knew that something was wrong. It was not a moment for thought, he hung there unsupported as his fingers clutched and lost it; and he was falling, thinking with a curious astonishment, "Why, Mike did that." Then he felt the rush of terror.

It was a dreadful feeling, pawing at the air; lost without momentum. He saw the sea of faces coming at him, starting into individual focus. He missed the net. He knew he would hit the ring fence and he sought to twist in the air. The jarring shock came. It seized his ribs, his whole pelvis, like an iron claw. It made him open his mouth soundlessly in pain. He felt them lift him, laying him prone on the sand. Now about him was a crowd. He saw Judith's shocked face above him, and the clowns. Then, over their heads, he had a vision of Mike's red agonised face thrusting forward crying, "Let me get to him!" Pat Chantry pushed him back violently, shouting, "God damn you, I'll finish you for this." It was growing confused. But closer, much closer, was poor Beppo's paint-streaked visage, breathing compassionately over him. It was a funny thing to take away with him, for it was the last glimpse he had of anything; and with that, he went off into waves of dark.

He woke in a hospital. His body was encased in plaster. He came from, and went back to, unconsciousness, a number of times. Once he remembered Judith with him. Perhaps Pat

was there, too. If he remembered rightly, he said to her, "Where's Mike?"

"He and Sarah have gone."

"I wanted to talk to him."

"He came here a lot. He was mad. Dad wouldn't let him see you. He threw him out."

"I'm sorry. What did he say?"

"Nothing. He was in a frightful state."

Yes, Pat must have been there too; they were his hands that rested on him as he said, "Never mind that now, that's enough."

But Tino said, "No. I wish I could have seen him. Now he'll go away tormenting himself all the time. It's so damned silly. I'd have told him not to be such a fool. You can't blame a man for a bit of an impulse. I know Mike, he didn't know what he was doing. I wish I could have seen him just that once."

Then he was out of bed. It took some time, weeks and weeks, but at last they were wheeling him in a chair. The plaster that made him feel as though he would belong for ever to the bed was off, and they massaged his body frequently until it came back to life. He felt it stirring and throbbing. It was a good feeling. In time, he was pretty sure it was going to be all right. Then the clowns came to see him, Beppo and Louie and the rest. The circus had moved on to Nice; it wasn't so far, and there was a memorable day when Rosa and Chang also arrived; Chang's enormous body created a stir in the hospital, with his long black hair wrapped in its highly-coloured bandeau.

Rosa chuckled, "I'll bet those nurses wouldn't mind him breaking his back. The way they're looking at him, they'd like to have the handling of *him* in bed."

Chang's big white teeth flashed.

"They'd have to take Chiki too!"

Before she went, Rosa said anxiously, "Everything all right? You know?" She looked at Tino. She didn't know how to put it, for Judith was there.

"All over," smiled Tino. "All burned out!"

He—and Judith—knew what she meant.

He left the hospital of the *Cannebière* at Marseilles six months after he went in. He could walk, he could run, he could do the things most men do; but he would never swing from a trapeze again. He did not rejoin the circus, but went home to his parents. Pat had other ideas for him. When he and Judith came back to London, Tino went into the circus office, which, said Pat, was the place that could really do with him. The way Pat put it, it was a bit of luck for him.

Tino and Judith were married in the spring.

They found a little place in Soho, not far from his parents, and settled down. They were very content. Of course, Tino missed the circus, he often said to Judith they must get out into the caravans sometimes, he wanted to smell the sawdust again. And he often spoke of Mike and wondered what had happened to him. What was the use of arguing?—you couldn't kill it, he was just fond of him. But of Sarah he never spoke a word; and sometimes Judith searched his face thoughtfully, wondering if, as he'd put it himself, it was all burned out. Then she forgot it too.

When Judith told him that they were to have a child (said Pat), you couldn't have found a happier man than Tino around. They were a really devoted couple. For to Pat's way of thinking, it had all turned out for the best. He was beginning to feel his age a bit, he wanted someone to take hold of things after him. And Tino was bright, he knew all the ropes; he was a damned sight more use in his office, organising the circus tours, than swinging up above on the bars! After all, what future was there for a trapezist? Look at the Orsinis, Mr. and Mrs. The best he'd known in the business, bar none—and see what it had got them. Keeping this wine shop here! (No offence meant, of course.) No, you might even call it a blessing in disguise, taking it all round! As Pat always said, it's an ill-wind that blows nobody any good. It wasn't an original remark, or even clever; but, then, he hadn't got where he was in the world by being clever. No. Just smart.

. . . . .

This was the story Francis heard. He had got the substance of it from Pat and Judith, with emotional interjections from Mr. and Mrs. Orsini. They had told it better than they knew. Francis sat for a little while with his hand over his eyes, thinking. It was hard to bring himself back to the present, he had got such a vivid picture of that travelling circus, of the curious people that lived in it, of the French towns they had wandered amongst, it had left him with a feeling of nostalgic loss; he had really lived with them, he felt. He had been utterly absorbed. Even now, the presence of that strange red-headed Irishman, Mike, was palpable in the room: and Sarah, with her clear fresh beauty, so fatal, her dark eyes and soft hair. Close your eyes and you very nearly sensed the various smells that dwelt around the Big Top, the din of a rough crowd and the sound of horses' hooves beating at the ring.

He said at length, "Did you ever hear anything of Mike?"

"Yes," said Pat. "He and Sarah went to Paris. We got news of them sometimes. I think he was sorry about Tino. By George, I had it in for the brute, but I admit Tino was the only one he cared about. He took it out of Sarah, I bet. Of course, it couldn't last. He left her. He's somewhere in Paris now. He gave up the circus. He's serving in some fifth-rate bar."

"And he never wrote?"

"Never."

"But he heard what happened?"

"He must have. The police checked up about Sarah; after all, he'd been living with her. But he never gave a sign."

Francis stared at the Orsinis. They were looking blankly into the fire as though the re-living of the tale had exhausted them. Mrs. Orsini's eyes were dim. What poignant re-collections must have passed through their minds! Judith was utterly quiet. She seemed to have faded from their midst. She stirred only as, next door, momentarily, the baby cried. Francis glanced at Pat; and queerly, Pat smiled.

"It's a strange story," said Francis.

"Brother," said Pat, somewhat disrespectfully, "that's a great gift of understatement you've got!"

COUNSEL FOR THE CROWN

When Sir Eustace Watkyn's butler told him that a priest was waiting to see him—not that the butler, as well-trained as a barrister of Sir Eustace's substance expected him to be, announced Francis with such lack of ceremony: he repeated his name with deference—his thin mouth tightened. The butler recognised the sign and gathered that his master was displeased. However, all Sir Eustace said curtly was, "Show him in." The butler withdrew. Sir Eustace rose and went over to the fire. It was early evening, not very cold, but the room was large, with a surfeit of marble, and it needed a good blaze to take away its chill. In the meantime, he slipped a monocle into his eye. He wore it, generally in court, partly because the sight of that single eye was weak, partly because it riveted attention on his face. It was a face that impressed. It was thin and austere, with flat closely-shaven cheeks. His eyes were nut-brown and shiny, contrasting oddly with his thin silver brows. His hair, abundant and well-kept, was also remarkably pale; he was not old, barely past middle age, but it had begun to grey rapidly after his son had died. However, he thought it gave him dignity. But his face had a dusky hue that, in a less ascetic-looking man, might have suggested the habit of drink. If that had been your guess, it would not have been so very far out. He had begun to indulge during the last few years, never during the day, but in the evenings when he was loneliest. That, too, was something that had started with the death of his son. He was spare of build. He was proud of his figure and held himself erect. He had flat shoulders that pleased his tailor, who regarded him as a model upon which a cutter's craft became a joy. His tailor said that he would, at a pinch, have dressed Sir Eustace for nothing; it was a privilege to know that

wherever Sir Eustace went he took with him suits that reflected his professional skill. Sir Eustace would have smiled thinly. He was a man (his fees were at the peak of his own profession) who could well afford to pay his bills. In the meantime, Francis came in. Sir Eustace examined him curiously.

"How do you do," he said.

"I'm afraid I've no right to take up your time like this."

"Pray don't mention it. Won't you take a seat?"

Francis sat. Coolly, Sir Eustace noted the young priest's muscular build, his American square-toed shoes and his ardent face. He perceived that he wore his clothes carelessly and that his appearance would not have suffered if he had bought himself a new hat. But the young man (he found it hard to think of him as a priest: he associated that calling with something more venerable) had shrewd candid eyes. He had a trick of stillness that disarmed you. He was smiling now as he glanced about the room.

"I was admiring your house. It's fine and gracious."

"I find it cold." Sir Eustace touched the decanter. "May I offer you a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"In that case, you won't mind if I help myself."

Sir Eustace did so and sat. He said nothing more. He waited for Francis. Now Francis began:

"I'm an American. I think my friends wrote to you? I'm leaving shortly. I very much wanted to see you before I went."

"Oh, yes?"

"I don't know if you were told why I came?"

"I have some slight idea."

Which was not strictly correct, for Sir Eustace knew exactly why he'd come. He had already received a letter from a judge of the King's Bench division, of the priest's own faith; it had irritated him faintly but it was from a legal luminary with whom it was as well to remain on cordial terms. He darted a sharp glance at Francis. Really, in the short time in which he'd been here, this young person seemed to have cultivated some very influential friends. When he got the letter, Sir Eustace's first instinct had been to beg himself off. He thought

it presumptuous. However, on second thoughts, he didn't see what harm could be done and he had no doubt that he would be able to send his visitor packing in very little time. It was no mean gift, the frigid manner with which he could repel those who intruded on his privacy. So Sir Eustace had written in reply, saying that he did not know how he could serve Francis but he would be pleased to see him at his house. The judge had hinted that it was a recent case in which the young priest was interested, quite personal, of course—and it rested entirely with Sir Eustace to what extent he cared to put himself out. Really. It was a bore.

So, probably sensing Sir Eustace's objection to his call, Francis came swiftly to the point. This is what he said. It was in connection with the case of Tino Orsini. It had fallen to him to officiate in the death-cell. (At this, Sir Eustace lifted his eyes quite oddly, then dropped them again.) His interest wasn't so much in the legal niceties of the case—rather, it was an intimate heart-searching, it was a matter connected with his faith—something so highly personal that it was difficult to express: he wondered if Sir Eustace understood? If he did, Sir Eustace gave no sign. No. Probably, he did not. Francis had talked to the prison Governor, he'd met young Orsini's parents and his wife and an old circus associate. He thought now that Sir Eustace, as counsel for the crown in the case, might be able to enlighten him on it more precisely: present it, so to speak, in a keener light. Would he be so kind? Francis murmured: it was an imposition, of course.

It was, thought Sir Eustace dryly. But, raising his eyebrows, he said only, "You could have read it up in the papers? It aroused some interest. It was quite extensively reported."

Francis said blandly, "I thought your legal eye might have seen more in it than the newspaper reporters saw."

And, indeed, it had! But that was something he was not going to tell this priest.

"Very well. I have an hour." Sir Eustace sighed and glanced languidly at his watch. "I have no objection to reviving the case for you." (It would most certainly not revive the accused: not that he would want to, if he could. That

young man had only got what he amply deserved!) And with this, the first tiny tremor of anger shook Sir Eustace. He really *didn't* care to go back on it. It was a case he could not think of without rancour.

However, "Rex versus Orsini," he began. His austere eyes fixed themselves on Francis. His manner became professionally remote. "It was a singular business. When I came to examine it, it seemed to me that the crown had an incontrovertible case. It was a murder of considerable brutality. Frankly, I did not see how the jury could avoid bringing in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. I thought the defence would have its work cut out. I was told later by defending counsel that the accused hadn't been as co-operative as he might. He made many damaging admissions in his evidence. They hampered his counsel. The prisoner was well aware that he was being tried for his life. But he didn't seem to care." Sir Eustace frowned. "And, of course, there were certain features, abhorrent features, about the case that were not likely to prompt a jury to recommend mercy. As it transpired, they did not." By now, Sir Eustace had placed together his finger-tips precisely. A trifle fascinated, Francis stared; he thought there was no old-fashioned posture the man was not going to adopt. He had already wiped his monocle and placed it in his eye. Sir Eustace said, "You understand, of course, that it is not the function of crown counsel to go after a verdict of guilty—in our English system of justice it is the clear duty of the prosecution to present the facts of the case fairly so that the jury may understand exactly what is involved. The intention of the prosecution is to see only that justice is done."

"Surely!" smiled Francis. "At home, we work on much the same lines too."

(That execrable American accent.) But: "Indeed," said Sir Eustace, thinly. He had read something of American courts, with shirt-sleeved counsel and the melodramatic tricks they frequently employed. No matter. He did not intend to go into that.

"I merely wish you to understand that counsel for the

crown present the case to the jury quite without bias."

Without bias! Now Sir Eustace gave the faintest sigh. He could never be quite sure that he had acted so in this Orsini case. He was deeply attached to the legal profession, indeed, it was all that was left to him in life; and with a desperate honesty he could not admit, in his heart, that he'd been unaffected by a certain personal aspect of the case. But what was the use of going into it? He had tormented his mind with it again and again. He let his thoughts drift back. There were one or two of his friends—and enemies—who had hinted that he should never have accepted the brief. It all hinged upon his son. Of course, all his associates knew how he'd been devoted to Tom! He had lost his wife when Tom was a child and he and the boy had grown up very close. A dear kiddie! Sir Eustace knew that he hadn't been so frigid then! They used to romp during the holidays; he often took Tom down to a farm and taught him to ride. The boy's bright face and cries of joy as he jogged on the pony was something he'd never forget. As he grew older, he took him fishing and when he came home from school on holidays they were never apart. They went abroad together. They boated. They played tennis. They had, indeed, been halcyon days. As Tom grew up and went to Cambridge, everybody laughed and said he was going to be a devil with the girls. Sir Eustace smiled, but he hadn't been displeased. Tom was about nineteen then and he was turning out a good-looker—no doubt about it! He was tall and slender, but beautifully knit, with a dark eager face and the longest eyelashes you ever saw. They said those eyelashes of his would work havoc with any girl's heart. But Sir Eustace didn't think the boy was in much danger—nor the girls—Tom had a kind generous nature, a pure gentleman, and he could never have done anything unsavoury, not to save his life. He was the apple of Sir Eustace's eye! Of course, it was a mistake to dote on him so, but what could you do?—the boy simply tugged at your heart-strings, and when he smiled his gay infectious smile, he could have wound his fond father round his little finger. Sir Eustace had meant him to follow in his profession, naturally! Tom didn't seem to mind, though he'd

shown a talent for music. A grand chap. The world had come to an end when Tom was killed.

He had joined up as soon as war broke out. He had been taken prisoner in North Africa—the Italians had got him near Benghazi. He had died eventually in a Neapolitan prison camp. Of maltreatment, Sir Eustace suspected. Tom hadn't been wounded and, for all his slender grace, he was really very strong. For six months, Sir Eustace had gone through life, seeing it in a grey mist. It seemed to him that his heart had turned to stone. He shunned company. He continued his work, but only because its preoccupation might serve to keep him from going mad. His fingers had begun to tremble and his hair had lost its sleek darkness almost at once. He grew out of the stupor in time, but he knew that he would not be the same again: the light had gone out of his life.

It had irked him when, examining the Orsini case in its beginnings, he had noted that the accused had also fought through the North African campaign—though on the enemy side. An Italian. Sir Eustace had no kind memories of them. But it would not have affected his handling of the case, for all his personal revulsion: why should it? he rarely cared for the looks or antecedents of any prisoner he saw in the dock. It was on the first day in court that the shock had come to him. When the prisoner was brought into the dock, Sir Eustace, deep in conversation with his junior, hadn't bothered to look up for a moment, then, sensing the stir of interest which always sprang up in court when the prisoner arrived, perfunctorily he lifted his eyes. What he saw was a young man, tall and slim, with a dark mobile face. He could not take his eyes off him: he stopped talking so abruptly that his junior must have wondered what was wrong. For an agonising instant, he had been reminded of Tom. The two had the same nervous grace, the same fluid features; he was shaken by the resemblance. When he recovered himself, he bent to his papers while counsel's preliminaries went on and the jury was sworn. But he could not help stealing an intense look at the prisoner again and again. Then a strange feeling came over him. It was dry and hot. He curiously resented the youth. On the one hand, he

was tugged by an odd instinctive sympathy, on the other, by a great revulsion of bitterness that this young Italian was standing here, alive and breathing—whether or not in mortal danger—while his own boy had gone under so vilely at the hands of his compatriots. A hair's breadth either way would have swayed his mind. Then he knew that he would find it hard not to relieve himself of so much accumulated pain. He thrust away the thought. It was demeaning. He would have to guard himself with great care. At all costs, he was determined to be just.

Of course, Sir Eustace did not tell this to Francis; he did not often confess it to himself. He merely described to him dryly the opening stages of the trial, the prisoner's bearing, and hoped that the priest would not observe the emotion he strove to conceal.

It was then, reliving it as he did, that Sir Eustace found himself caught up in his own account. The priest tended to slip from the picture. The events of the trial, the scene in the court-room, came so vividly to his mind; every detail; he would never forget them. He had stored it all so tightly in his heart, never speaking of it, that it was a peculiar relief to put it into words. It assuaged him. He knew that he was speaking with more intensity, that the priest was leaning forward, listening with a singular absorption, but he did not care.

He came now to the opening speech for the prosecution. When he rose to address the jury he had been quite composed; his address had been well prepared. He had no emotional tricks, no mannerisms at his disposal, but at least he knew this: he marshalled the facts clearly, with such precision that even the slowest amongst the jury could comprehend them with ease. And he was a good figure of a man. His crisp papery manner may not have inspired liking (some juries simply couldn't take to it), but it did gain trust. You felt that he was remote from the hurly-burly of life—as if he had stooped from a pedestal above the common ruck of humanity—and he would give a fact its proper weight: no more, no less. So his speech was a model of its kind.

The Clerk of the Court had already taken the prisoner's plea:

"Tino Orsini, you are charged with the murder of Sarah Linden on the ninth of January of this year. Are you guilty or not guilty?"

The prisoner had answered, "Not guilty, sir."

And the jury had then been duly sworn.

Sir Eustace began his opening speech by outlining briefly the details of the crime.

"May it please your Lordship, members of the jury: You have heard that the prisoner is standing upon his trial for the murder of a young woman named Sarah Linden. This murder was committed at exactly nine o'clock on the night of January the ninth. Who was the deceased? She had not been in this country long. But the police have been able to establish that she was of mixed French and English parentage. She was unmarried. Nothing whatever is known against her in France, in which country she lived the whole of her life. We have every reason to believe that she was of good character. Be that as it may—on the twenty-eighth day of December, she took over the tenancy of a room on the top floor of a block of tenements at number eleven, Alexandra Street, Soho. She kept herself to herself, not mingling with the other tenants of the building. However, she has been described by some of them as a remarkably attractive young woman. Certain photographs of her, in theatrical costume, have been circulated amongst you, exhibits six to ten, to be precise; you have them, have you not, members of the jury? They were found in her possession and from them you will no doubt form an impression that she was, indeed, by nature, handsomely endowed. She was a theatrical performer. She told the landlady of the tenements, Mrs. Moroni, who lives in the basement, that she had worked, first in French music-halls, then in an English circus that was touring France. She had come here to seek work. Now with such bizarre antecedents, completely without attachments as she was—and bearing in mind her uncommon personal attractions—you may be led into suspecting her mode of life. I beg of you to put such thoughts immediately from your minds! The landlady, Mrs. Moroni, who will offer major testimony regarding the crime—I may say that she was, in

fact, an actual witness of the horrible act—has stated that the life the young woman led was reserved. She spent the day visiting theatrical agencies in search of work, and rarely left her room at night.

"I would like you to observe this: Mrs. Moroni, who makes a habit of such perception, says that the young woman appeared to her to be undergoing some mental distress. Indeed, Mrs. Moroni will tell you that she found her in her room one evening in tears; the girl would only say that she was greatly unhappy, but she would give no reason why. Mrs. Moroni obtained the impression, from some chance words the deceased let fall, that she had recently suffered a tragic disappointment in some love affair.

"So much for the deceased.

"She had one connection in this country. He was a young man who had partnered her in her circus act in France, and with whom, on his own admission, she had once shared a somewhat passionate attachment. He says that, so far as he was concerned, it was at an end. It may be, when you come to consider the testimony, that you will conclude that this assurance is very far removed from the truth. That young man is the prisoner, Tino Orsini, who stands accused of her murder. Let us now come to him.

"He is married. His wife was anticipating the birth of a child, it was expected to be born, in fact, on the day of the murder, January the ninth. And, earlier in the evening, the accused had been told at the nursing home in which his wife lay that she would probably be delivered of her child at about ten o'clock. Naturally—as those of you in the jury who are fathers may readily understand—he was in a highly distracted state of mind. It was to be his first child and the agitation is one we can comprehend. He remained in the nursing home all evening. Then he was told by one of the nurses, who had observed his condition with sympathy, that there was little likelihood of the birth occurring for some hours. She suggested to him that it would take his mind off it if he went out and got himself a meal. At length, he said that he would go out and get some fresh air. He was so restless, he said, he couldn't keep still. He left the

nursing home at seven-thirty precisely, as Nurse Manning will testify.

"Now it is important to note the chronological order of events, as soon you will begin to understand. We next find him in the vicinity of Marble Arch. There he hailed a taxi and asked to be driven to number eleven, Alexandra Street, Soho. The driver, Mr. Higgins, dropped him at that address and was paid off. He says that the accused seemed to him to be rather flushed and excited, he fumbled with the change and dropped it twice. I do not think it is a point we ought to stress; the accused, after all, had undergone considerable strain at the nursing home. Now, before driving off, Mr. Higgins noted the time. Why? It was perfectly natural: he says he was wondering if he could catch some of the West End traffic, which is profitable at that time. He drove off, leaving the prisoner outside the tenements at exactly eight-thirty-five. This is important and I would ask you to note it. Eight-thirty-five."

Here, Sir Eustace paused for breath. It wasn't a bad thing to do, it enabled the jury to relax and digest the facts that had so far been presented to them. Sir Eustace swept his eye over them. They didn't impress him. He regarded them with something not far removed from active contempt. They were all listening raptly enough, but there was an inanity about some of them that made him wonder if they were capable of viewing precise legal interpretations in their proper light. One or two of them looked downright stupid: Sir Eustace had caught the judge, Mr. Justice Roper, examining these gentlemen narrowly and he had no doubt that his Lordship was likewise unimpressed. But there were three women on the jury, and these Sir Eustace regarded keenly; he thought that this was a case in which feminine susceptibilities would be highly affected; show them a young man betraying his wife, then in the very act of childbirth—resulting in murder, as he would seek to show—and already a hard core of antagonism against the prisoner was formed. Women! they could be the curse of juries. Not that their prejudices would damage the prosecution's case, oh, by no means; but it made him mentally curl his lips. He guessed that a few of the men were small shopkeepers. These were very

attentive. Probably it had become to them something of an awesome show. Well! They would see! He was glad to note one or two business men amongst them—you could recognise the type, they fidgeted impatiently as if they could not spare the time for diversions like this. They, at least, would give the case a shrewder look. They were more agile of mind, and would seize relentlessly upon salient issues. And the foreman appeared to be a professional man of sorts. So much the better; he would keep an obtuse jury to the facts.

Sir Eustace's gaze travelled around the court. It was packed. And so his glance came to rest upon the prisoner. Normally, in the prisoner's eyes one read antagonism and fear. Prosecuting counsel was his active enemy, it was not the law, it was him, in his imagination, he was fighting for his life. But here, the prisoner seemed quite queerly remote; he looked—how could Sir Eustace put it?—muffled with pain. He gazed at Sir Eustace without resentment, rather with a strained sympathy, as if he could understand that he was no more than an instrument of justice. He sat there, very quiet, his face extremely pale; and his slenderness was accentuated by the gross bulk of the constable next to him. How like Tom he was! It was agitating. To look at him was really to suffer the sensation that Tom had sprung to life. Again, that tiny flurry of rage came into Sir Eustace's heart. He wished, of a sudden, there had been time to throw up the case. Already he detested it. He stared at the prisoner, his shiny nut-brown eyes hard and unwavering; and now the prisoner, perhaps sensing something, leaned forward a trifle, an odd expression of curiosity coming into his face. And for a moment there was a strange affinity between them—vitalising it, on Sir Eustace's part, was hatred: bewilderment on the young man's. Then Sir Eustace stared down. Well, let it perturb his mind! The chap would have a great deal more to distract him as the case went on.

And with this, Sir Eustace turned his eyes to the judge. Mr. Justice Roper was incredibly old. His face was blank and wizened and heavily-jowled. His little black eyes, sometimes malicious, sometimes merely weary, were the only things that

enlivened it. His head was large and, in his full-bottomed wig, he gave you the impression of being a very big man; but if you went behind the bench you would have seen that his body was small and shrunken; his toes rested on a footstool—without it they would not have reached the floor. Sir Eustace had come up against him before. The old man domineered counsel. Sir Eustace met the judge's stony old eyes and a tremor of acrid anticipation passed between them. He thought Mr. Justice Roper objectionable. He was sure that Mr. Justice Roper looked upon him with equal dislike. But then, the judge's hooded eyes stared across the court and he disliked everybody there. In his long span on the bench, he had seen every vile trait of man; viciousness and brutality and deceit. He had witnessed tragedies innumerable and seen the weaknesses of humanity for which you could have only pity—betrayed hopes and passions; and he was sick of the lot of them. He was fanatically fair, but he would not tolerate any deviation from his rule. And his tongue had the licking virulence of a snake's. An old devil, the juniors said. He made them simmer. Well, Sir Eustace ventured to think he would get no change out of him.

But it was time to proceed. The jury was looking expectant. So Sir Eustace went on:

"We can now carry forward the movements of the prisoner a stage. Mrs. Tarrant, who lives in the building, next encountered the prisoner in the hall. He did not know the number of the room in which Miss Linden lived and Mrs. Tarrant directed him there. The prisoner went upstairs. Mrs. Tarrant says it was gone half-past eight; she cannot place it closer, but accepting Mr. Higgins' time of arrival—eight-thirty-five, you will remember—the prisoner must have been in the company of the deceased in her room at about twenty minutes to nine.

"We are now taken to the circumstances of the crime by an actual eye-witness: Mrs. Moroni. I told you that Mrs. Moroni lives in the basement. A little before nine o'clock she chanced to go out into the yard, which is overlooked by the back windows of the tenements, to empty a dust-bin. She left her

kitchen door open so that the light from it might be thrown across the yard. It was very dark, she said. She then heard a cry, a woman's cry, and looking up from whence it came was aghast to see a woman and a man struggling on one of the balconies on the top floor. Each tenement has a tiny iron balcony behind it, protected by a railing about four feet high. Mrs. Moroni will tell you that she could not make out the features of the two people she saw so dramatically above, it was night-time—but the french window behind them was flung wide and the room brightly lit, and what she saw clearly was the silhouette of the woman struggling violently with the man. Then the woman screamed. The man, whoever he may have been, then seemed half to hoist her and thrust fiercely at her, and Mrs. Moroni was horrified to see her flung bodily from the balcony to the ground. Mrs. Moroni was too shocked to move for a moment, but in that dreadful instant something engaged upon her consciousness: she is perfectly clear about this: she had left her wireless set playing as she went into the yard and through the open kitchen door she heard the time signal of Big Ben booming out for nine o'clock. We are thus, by a most fantastic, but, of course, utterly logical arrangement of circumstances, enabled to fix almost to the second the time of the murder. It was nine o'clock.

"What ensued then will appear to many of you to be lamentable. Mrs. Moroni screamed several times and soon many of the inhabitants of the tenements had run into the yard. The first thing they did was to examine the body of the victim, but it was clear to all of them that she had been instantly killed. The height of the tenement from which she was thrown is about sixty feet and she fell on to a concrete yard. The people who came running out into that dark area were mostly women and of foreign extraction; mainly Italian; it will perhaps cast no slur on them if I state that they appear to have behaved with some hysteria. It apparently occurred to nobody to attempt to intercept the murderer—at least, some of the women say that they thought of it but were much too frightened—and it was quite five minutes before anyone ran round to the front of the building. By then, of course, there was

nobody about. Then one of the women rang for the police. It was ten minutes past nine. Much vital time had been wasted, and it is a standing example to all of us that no time should be lost in such occurrences in calling the police.

"Briefly, I will tell you that on examination by a medical officer, it was found that the deceased had died of her injuries received from the fall. Mrs. Moroni's description of the struggle on the balcony is fully borne out by signs on the body of considerable violence. Her throat was greatly bruised as though she had been half throttled. It was plain that she had fought passionately for her life. The police, when they arrived, examined the victim's room and detected signs of the struggle, overturned furniture and torn curtains.

"So much for the circumstances of the crime. Now the police, at least, behaved with considerable promptitude. Little was known of the deceased. She was without connections in this country. You will readily appreciate that the police were dealing with something of a will-of-the-wisp. However, amongst her possessions was found a press photograph, taken by some French newspaper—you have it, have you not, members of the jury? it is exhibit two—and it shows, by flash-light, the deceased just before she was about to perform in some circus act. She is with two men who seem to have been her partners. You will note their theatrical costumes. The older of the two men, the one on the right, is seen, somewhat curiously, to be bearing a crutch. When this photograph was shown to Mrs. Tarrant, she immediately identified the younger man as the one she encountered in the hall. The police were aware that the deceased had worked in an English circus touring France. It belonged to a gentleman named Mr. Pat Chantry. On being interviewed and shown this photograph, Mr. Chantry identified the young man concerned: it was, in fact, his son-in-law. That is the prisoner, Tino Orsini.

"Early the following morning, Detective Inspector Hollo-way, in charge of the investigation, went to see the prisoner at his home. He was alone. His wife, you will recall, was in the nursing home. When he was asked if he had been in the vicinity of Alexandra Street the previous night, he stated

immediately that he had: that he had gone to visit the deceased, that he had, in fact, talked with her: but that he had left her after about ten minutes because she had reproached him bitterly, turning on him upbraidingly over something that had happened in the past. Detective Inspector Holloway noted a severe scratch on the prisoner's face. He inquired about it. The prisoner said (and he was somewhat downcast) that she had done it—she being the deceased. He then asked, 'What's happened? Is something wrong?'

"The Detective Inspector told him of the murder and the prisoner was so greatly shaken that for several minutes he could not speak.

"He then said that he had left the deceased alive. She had quarrelled with him, but he had not harmed her. When asked what time he left her, he said, 'I don't know.' He had gone away greatly distressed by the occurrence and had walked the streets for over an hour, he said. He could not say where. He did not remember. Thus, members of the jury, you are faced with the fact that the prisoner cannot account for his movements at the very vital time of the murder, nor for the period immediately subsequent. He disappeared; he merely walked the streets. We can produce no one who can vouch for this, and you may find it a circumstance that, from his point of view, can only be called unfortunate.

"Very well. He next appears at the nursing home. He returns there at ten o'clock. The first to see him is Nurse Manning. She is struck immediately by his appearance. The prisoner was extremely pale and haggard, she will tell you, and his face bore a newly-inflicted scratch. It occurred to her that he might have been in an accident. She said to him, 'What on earth have you done to your face?' The prisoner did not appear to realise what she was talking about and put his hand to the scratch, saying, 'Oh, it's nothing, nothing.' He then asked after his wife. Nurse Manning was able to tell him that his wife had given birth to a healthy boy at nine o'clock.

"So be it. In the meantime, Detective Inspector Holloway had received a report from the Home Office pathologist that traces of human tissue and skin had been found under the

murdered girl's finger-nails. He then called upon the prisoner once more and asked him if he had anything further to say: or if he could account more fully for his movements at the time of the crime.

"The prisoner merely stated, 'I didn't do it. I could never have harmed her, not if I'd tried.'

"Thus, members of the jury, so far as we have gone, certain facts are plain, are they not? The prisoner went to visit the deceased and arrived there at thirty-five-minutes to nine. We know that he went straight up to her and that his condition was sufficiently abnormal to attract the attention of the taxi-driver—whether or not it was brought about by the approach of fatherhood and his wife's travail. In this connection, I must recall to you the inevitable fact: that the deceased once shared with the prisoner an intimate association: so you must ask yourselves whether the prisoner and the deceased were not more deeply involved in a guilty liaison than the prisoner wishes us to believe. To continue—there then occurred between them an altercation. Some twenty minutes after the prisoner arrived, at exactly nine o'clock, a man was seen to throw the deceased girl to her death from the balcony of her room. The prisoner is not discovered for over an hour, but when he next appears, at the nursing home, he is agitated and his face bears a violently-administered scratch. Bearing in mind the pathologist's report, you will have to determine whether or not it is a reasonable assumption that it was sustained in a struggle with the girl.

"On January the fourteenth, the prisoner was arrested upon the charge of murdering Sarah Linden. He was cautioned, and when the charge was read over to him he replied, 'I am not guilty.'

"So the question which you must now consider, members of the jury, is this: Can you believe the prisoner's story that it was not he who was in the girl's room at nine o'clock, but someone else? And that all the circumstances I have outlined to you are purely fortuitous? If so, damning as they are against the prisoner, you must find him not guilty of the crime. But if you are not satisfied with his story, you must

then consider the evidence with the seriousness it deserves.

"If he was, in fact, still in the girl's room at nine o'clock, then we must assume that he was the man who threw her to her death; and the evidence we shall produce to you serves to bear out this view. There is unhappily no single fact, not one, members of the jury, that points to any other conclusion. What the prosecution say to you is this: if the prisoner's visit to the deceased girl was not connected with their past association, then you may well ask yourselves what drew him there. If the altercation that then ensued so violently was not connected with it, what was its cause? And if the prisoner did, in fact, leave the deceased alive some time before nine o'clock, where was he at the time of the murder and immediately subsequent? It is the prosecution's view that, subject to any explanation which may be forthcoming, the prisoner was the man who was guilty of the murder.

"Now, with the assistance of my learned friend, Mr. Barrow, I will call the evidence before you."

And Sir Eustace sat down.

He wasn't dissatisfied: his cool detachment hadn't been without its effect. They said he had a patronising manner. Let them. He knew that it was the petty histrionics of counsel, the dramatic overtones and pauses—mummers' tricks!—that, with such very ordinary people as jurors, struck a false note. Dense, blundering where fine legal points were concerned, easily moved to obstinacy, they knew that a man not so very different from them, whatever his character or environment, was standing trial for his life; and once the novelty of the spectacle was gone, they got an oppressed feeling of responsibility. "There, but for the grace of God, go I." They were closer in spirit to the prisoner than many learned counsel knew. So, during his speech, Sir Eustace watched them closely. He saw that the doltish-looking ones had absorbed the prosecution's case satisfactorily and were looking wiser than they were. It was a compliment to Sir Eustace. One of the business men, a burly man in a blue serge suit, with a watch-chain across a tight paunch, had dropped his fidgeting impatience. And he nodded at times, begrudgingly, as if, like the

shrewd business man he was, he had been given an efficiently-drawn balance-sheet—no, it wasn't a bad thing to let them feel that the law could be run like a competent shop. The women were quiet; but their glances strayed curiously to the prisoner. At first, Sir Eustace had read in their eyes uneasy compassion: it wasn't unnatural, the chap was young and good-looking, and that queer air of pain must have given them an extra-ordinary twinge. But as he outlined the case, mildly and concisely, you could sense the change. They were no longer so sure. When they stole a glance at the prisoner it was with a more thoughtful frown. As for the foreman, he was no fool—an engineer or teacher, perhaps—he didn't even look at the prisoner and Sir Eustace guessed that he wasn't interested in him as a man: show him facts, show him that they were incontrovertible, and like a bridge-structure or a maths lesson he would accept their inevitable shape. In Sir Eustace's opinion, no bad attitude of mind.

The prosecution's first witness was the police sergeant who had arrived in the patrol car at the scene of the crime. Sir Eustace's junior, Mr. Barrow, examined him. The sergeant said that he had closed the entrance to the tenements at once; indeed, they had cordoned off the immediate neighbourhood, but they had been called very late, it was nearly thirteen minutes after the murder that they arrived in Alexandra Street and, of course, a lot of valuable time had been lost.

Examined upon the nature of Alexandra Street, he said this: it was half residential—tenements mostly, with a few shops and restaurants. They were mainly foreign. Italian and French. Was it a populous thoroughfare? No. Most of the traffic went down Greek Street. And since many of the restaurants would normally be closing at the time, he didn't think there would have been much doing in the street.

"And it was dark?"

"Rather dark. Badly lit."

There was some description of the tenements—and then Mr. Barrow asked the witness,

"Now by what possible means could the murderer have left the deceased's room?"

"There's a fire escape down the back. But there'd be people on it immediately Mrs. Moroni screamed. He could only have gone out one way."

"And what is that?"

"Down the front stairs and out into the street."

"Would the stairs normally be deserted at that time? Or frequented by tenants and visitors?"

"Well, sir, they're homely people. With the kids being in bed, and knowing that kind of tenement, I'd say pretty quiet."

The sergeant was led to say that he had found an excited crowd gathered in the yard and it was at first difficult to make any sense of them. Apologetically, he said, "Foreign, you know." Mrs. Moroni, who had apparently been an eye-witness of the murder, was greatly shaken and when the doctor—who came right away—had pronounced life extinct in the girl, he had had to go over and attend to her. In the meantime, of course, he, the sergeant, had proceeded to the deceased's room.

"It is on the fifth floor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell the jury what you saw when you got there."

The sergeant described the scene. Most of the room had been in order, but over by the french window there were signs of a struggle. The carpet had been rucked up. Two chairs and a lamp-table had been knocked over. The lamp-bulb was smashed and the shade crushed. One of the curtains had been torn down and dragged on to the balcony. And there—on the balcony hand rail—were scratches as though somebody had grabbed hold of it.

"That is interesting. Scratches on the paint?"

Ring scratches, yes. When he went below, the sergeant had found similar paint marks on the deceased's ring.

"Now as to the balcony. How large is it?"

"About six feet by four."

"It looks straight down on to the tenement yard, does it not?"

"Yes, sir. A sheer drop of about sixty feet. Straight on to concrete."

Mr. Barrow concluded, "One last thing before I finish with you. Was there anything in the room to suggest what the deceased had been doing prior to her death?"

"She'd had supper."

"Alone, did it appear?"

"Yes, sir. There was only one set of supper things out. One used plate, one coffee cup, and so on."

"Then there was nothing to suggest to you that she was expecting anyone?"

Mr. Justice Roper sighed. He leaned forward, his eyes hooded patiently. "Mr. Barrow, how can the witness enlighten us on that? He is not here to offer surmises. The deceased had had supper alone. I do not think there is anything further to be gleaned from it. Keep to the point, Mr. Barrow."

"I will endeavour to do so, my Lord."

And the witness was relinquished. The cross-examination was brief. It stressed somewhat Mrs. Moroni's shaken condition. It tended to suggest that she could not be too reliable a witness. The sergeant, conscious of the judge's restless eyes, would not be drawn. The doctor who had arrived on the scene was next called. Sir Eustace examined him. The deceased had died of cerebral injuries. Death would have been practically instantaneous. The description of the injuries was precise, but disturbing to the jury. There then followed a building superintendent of the council, who described the construction of the balcony. The rail was four feet high. The surface of the iron was rough. It had a flaked coating of rust. He was a brusque man and larded his replies with technicalities. The gist of what he said, bluntly, was this: the deceased, in struggling with her assailant, could not possibly have slipped accidentally to her death.

"You are reasonably sure of that?"

"It's a four-foot rail. I've tested it with a woman of her height. She'd have to be lifted bodily and thrown over it."

"We must make this clear to the jury. Would you say that the action called for unusual strength?"

"Not unusual. The rail would have acted as a lever. It

would have needed the knack more than anything. Knowing how to heave."

Nor could defending counsel budge this obdurate witness: it would have needed strength, he admitted: but skill at heaving, more than anything. Of course, he couldn't say how fiercely the deceased had fought. And since it required no keen eye to see what was passing pensively through the jurors' minds—the prisoner, for all his slenderness, had been a circus trapezist—defending counsel forbore to press the point. He took the witness away from it adeptly. But there was no more to be got out of him. The next witness was called.

This was Mrs. Moroni. There was a slight stir in the court; she was expected to be a major witness. Her appearance suggested a colourful, if voluble, testimony. She was plump and breast-heavy, and you had no doubt that she'd had to hand over the care of a whole apartment-full of children while she came to court. She spoke with an accent: Italian. Her sharp black eyes shone. But she was taking the occasion seriously. Sir Eustace, when he rose, knew that a garrulous witness was less effective with a jury than one who told exactly what he knew, no more, no less. She would have to be handled with care if she wasn't to damage her own value with verbosity.

In a few moments, he was gratified. She was florid, but crisp. She was a really excellent witness.

"Your name is Margherita Moroni?"

"Yes."

"You live at number eleven, Alexandra Street?"

"That is so."

"Do you have some special duties there, attached to your residence?"

"Well, sir, you know, it is a block of tenements. I live in the basement. I look after the building, clean up, keep an eye on the tenants, make everything in order. Is a very big job."

"Quite so. Now, Mrs. Moroni. When did Miss Sarah Linden —that is, the deceased—come to live in your building?"

"Exact date?"

"If you can tell us."

Mrs. Moroni took a small black book from her bosom, thumbed the pages with a frown, then answered, "December twenty-eighth."

"Then she only lived there about thirteen days?"

"Correct."

"In that time, did you see much of her? Reach any sort of intimacy with her?"

"Well, I like to answer this way. When she comes, I think to myself, a single girl, very pretty—you know?—it's that kind of district, I think maybe a good thing if I keep an eye on her. Trouble with men, you understand? Then I see right away there is going to be no worries like that. She is very quiet. Very respectable. Keeps herself to herself. I clean up the stairs and so one day I start to talk to her in her room."

"Please continue."

"Soon, I get to know what it is she does. Most interesting! She was in the music-halls, doing swinging things, with how you call it——?"

"A trapeze?"

"Trapeze. That is it. She is all alone in London. Sometimes I think she don't talk to another soul. She tells me she also works in a circus. All over France. Shows me many interesting photographs. She has just come over from Paris and is looking for work. You want me to tell you like this?"

"Yes, please go on."

"Then I get to be sorry for her."

"Indeed? Why?"

"She is downhearted. Then one day—might be coupla days before she is killed—I go up to her room and she is sitting there. She is crying."

"Did you ask her why?"

"I am a mother. Of course. She says she is very unhappy. Why, I ask her? Is it that you have not much money maybe? She shakes her head and says, no, it isn't that. So I say to her: Is it some man?"

"What did she reply?"

"She gives me a funny look, like the way you hit a dog, and again her eyes go full of tears. It hurts my heart. She says:

'It's all over now. All over.' So I think to myself, ah, poor thing, she has already been bitten——"

Sir Eustace sensed, rather than heard, the judge's impatient stir.

"What do you mean by 'bitten', Mrs. Moroni?"

"Well, that she has had trouble with some man. It is so plain."

Mr. Justice Roper, not unkindly, said, "Try to restrict your evidence to what you know, Mrs. Moroni. To what was said or done in your presence. You understand?"

"I will tell only the truth, sir."

"You may go on."

Mrs. Moroni was not put out by the judge, curiously gentle (for him) though he had been. In thinking of the scene it had greatly upset her and she touched her handkerchief to her emotional eyes. A gem of a witness, thought Sir Eustace dryly. Incredible. No English woman could behave like that. She said that, in her own way, like any mother, she had tried to comfort the girl. She told her that perhaps it was only a little quarrel? They all knew what men were like, did they not? But the tears had only run down the girl's face and what she said was this, " 'No, not any more. It's over. He's finished with me.' "

Were those the exact words or Mrs. Moroni's interpretation of them?

Mrs. Moroni didn't know what Sir Eustace meant: interpretation. Those were the exact words. She would never forget them as long as she lived. Then, because Miss Linden was weeping as though her heart would break, Mrs. Moroni thought the girl would rather be alone and left her. The fact was, she was in quite a state herself.

"During the period she lived in your building, did she have any visitors?"

"Never."

"Any letters?"

"Not one. That is what I think is so peculiar. To be all so alone in the world! That is why I am so terribly sorry for her."

Sir Eustace chanced to glance at the prisoner. He was

leaning forward, his face glistening with sweat. He wore a look of the most poignant distress. It was clear that what Mrs. Moroni had said had deeply affected him. Then Sir Eustace noted that some of the jurors were watching him stealthily. He'd do well to control his emotions, Sir Eustace thought grimly. He could hardly ask the jury to believe that his association with the girl was anything but fervent if he continued to reveal his feelings as nakedly as that. At length:

"Now, Mrs. Moroni, we come to the unfortunate incidents of January the ninth. That is, the day of the murder. When did you first see her that day?"

"Near as I can remember, say, seven o'clock. She came down to borrow some milk."

"That would be about two hours before her death?"

"Is right."

"Was she in good spirits?"

"As always. Quiet. A little sad."

The evidence dealt with what had passed between them. It was indicative of Mrs. Moroni's maternal nature and the girl's shut-in loneliness: apparently, it had gone like this. Mrs. Moroni had asked her if she was staying in. The answer was, yes. Mrs. Moroni attempted to persuade her to go out, to see a nice picture maybe. But the girl only smiled and said that she was tired. She would make herself something to eat and go early to bed.

"Then you did not gather that she was expecting a visitor?"

"I am sure not."

"And that was the last you saw of her before her death?"

"Before her death."

"Now we must come to that. Mrs. Moroni, what were your movements just before nine o'clock?"

Mrs. Moroni took a deep breath as if—with trepidation—it was something for which she had been nerving herself.

"I went into the yard to empty my dust-bin."

"If your Lordship pleases" (this to the judge), "I would like Mrs. Moroni to describe the subsequent incidents to the jury in her own words. I will endeavour, if necessary, to keep her to the point."

Mr. Justice Roper: "Very well."

"Mrs. Moroni, tell the jury, as clearly as you can, what happened then, just what it was you saw in the yard."

She licked her lips.

"All right. It is dark. So when I go into the yard I leave my kitchen door open with the light on. My wireless is still playing inside. I do what I have to do, then, suddenly, I stand. I hear a strange noise high up."

"Let me interrupt you one moment, Mrs. Moroni. What do you mean by a strange noise? A cry?"

"A scraping noise. A shuffling. Like people treading with their feet on one of the balconies."

"Pray go on."

"I look up. On the top balcony—is Miss Linden's—I see a woman and a man struggling. I cannot make out their faces, the french window is wide open, the light full on behind them, you understand—but I see that the man has the woman by the throat and is shaking her. *Mama mia!* I think I must be going mad. She is holding on to the balcony. I am ready to faint. Then, suddenly, he gives her a kind of push, a lift, and I think —*Maria Santissima!*—he is going to throw her off. I try to cry out. But nothing will come. I am dry inside. My throat is like a knot. Then he lifts her. She falls. Oh, my God! Will I ever forget that noise? And while I am standing there, like a ghost you understand, I hear from my kitchen the wireless giving out with Big Ben for nine o'clock. It brings back my voice. I scream. Again and again. Oh, a hundred times. People come running out on to the fire escape. They shout, what is the matter with you, Mrs. Moroni? Why you scream, Mrs. Moroni? Soon there is a crowd in the yard."

Mrs. Moroni threw Sir Eustace a despairing look. She wiped her face. She went on:

"They go to Miss Linden, I see that it is her, and then somebody says, she is dead. How did it happen, they ask. Everybody is around me. I point up. A man, I cry. A man! But when we look up, all we see is one curtain hanging over the balcony, but there is no longer anyone there. Talk, talk, talk! Everybody talks. Nobody wants to go up. Then at last

someone runs up the fire escape into the room. He shouts down, the room is empty, there is nobody here. They keep asking me, Mrs. Moroni, what did you see? He threw her, I cry. The man. Then somebody says, better call the police. So the police come. And that is all I have to tell."

She did not know how graphically effective her testimony had been. The jurors were intent. The picture leapt so vividly to one's mind, the dark yard, the two figures struggling silently on the balcony as, below, the petrified Mrs. Moroni watched. Then the last brutal thrust. The fall to the distant concrete yard. The sound of it was not easily shut out of one's thoughts. Then the excited crowd in the yard, the futile jabbering in a foreign language, like children; and up above, while so much vital time slipped by, the single curtain fluttering in the empty room. Sir Eustace guessed that Mrs. Moroni would not easily be shaken by cross-examination. The incidents had etched themselves on her harassed mind. He took her back over the evidence, amplifying its details; it served only to throw on those sombre events a truly smoky light. And now, glancing fleetingly at the prisoner, Sir Eustace saw the pallor of his face. Despair! No, horror, he thought. His head was bent. He, too, had re-lived the scene and more palpitantly than they. He could very well do so: he had seen it: acted it. Before this trial was over, he would be hard put to convince the jury that he had not.

But before she was relinquished to the cross-examination, Mrs. Moroni cast a doubtful glance at the prisoner.

"I had to say what I saw. I hope I have not done him any harm?"

Grimly, Sir Eustace smiled.

Defending counsel did not shake her on the vital points. The suggestion that the deceased might have fallen accidentally during the struggle, obstinately she would not admit.

"Is not possible. I saw it. He threw her. Pushed her. Whoever he was."

And so it stood; at least, with the jury. One saw it. An emotional lot. They might decry an excitable foreign woman, overwrought as she was, but you could not doubt that what

she had told them was exactly what she had seen. Nor would she agree with defending counsel that she might have been mistaken regarding the time-signal. She had heard it booming in the yard. Every stroke was in her mind. She knew her wireless tone too well. Nine o'clock. So she was dismissed.

The succeeding witnesses, all residents in the tenements, supported her statement. They had all come straight into the yard. They had seen and heard. Mrs. Moroni's story grew into authentic shape.

Then Mr. Albert Edward Higgins was called.

He was a taxi-driver. He was a thick-set man, round and ball-like, with a fringe of hair round a shiny skull. He wore a heavy moustache. His Cockney accent and his self-confidence were piercing. On January the ninth, some time after eight o'clock, his taxi had been hailed in the vicinity of Marble Arch. He recognised the passenger in court. There he was: the accused. He had told Mr. Higgins to drive him to number eleven, Alexandra Street, Soho. That was where he had gone. He had got a good look at the accused when he got out. "We wasn't far from a street lamp. There was my cab lights too."

"Quite. Did he leave any particular impression on you as he paid you off?"

"Yes."

"Tell the jury."

"Well, he was a bit excited like. Fumbling with his money, and when I gave him his change he dropped it twice. He just sort of chuckled. I thought to meself, you've had a couple over the odds——"

Mr. Justice Roper, curtly, "There is no need for that."

Mr. Higgins could only hasten to say, "Oh, I knew he was sober. Sort of flushed, but he talked all right," and was sharply—almost venomously—reproved by the judge. When it was over, Mr. Higgins, so assertively sure of himself to begin with, was now only uneasily conscious of the little spider-like figure on the bench. And he couched his replies in a more chastened tone. But led by Sir Eustace discreetly, he came to the major objective of his testimony: the question of the time. He was perfectly sure of it, having checked it as he drove off.

"And what time was it?"

"Eight-thirty-five."

"Tell the jury how it is you can be so precise."

"Well, I looked at my watch. What I had in mind was to catch a bit of the cinema traffic in Leicester Square."

"Did anything on your arrival there check that time?"

"Big picture at the Empire ended eight-forty. I got there just as the crowd was coming out."

"My Lord, there has been a deposition to that effect from the cinema management. If your Lordship pleases, I will call witnesses on that point. One last question, Mr. Higgins, before I finish with you. Did you see the prisoner go into number eleven Alexandra Street, that is, the tenement building to which you had driven him?"

"No. I just caught a glimpse of him on the pavement staring up at it. Then I drove off."

And Sir Eustace left Mr. Higgins to the mercy of the defence. Some sharp exchanges ensued. The prisoner had relaxed somewhat; he was watching Mr. Higgins mildly enough; the pallor of his face had gone. But to Sir Eustace, studying him narrowly, he seemed once more to have grown remote. He had taken on that disembodied look of a spectator again. Didn't he know what was being woven so inexorably around him? And then Sir Eustace wondered: what had brought on that racking emotion, the first the prisoner had shown, when Mrs. Moroni had described the dead girl's loneliness? Oh, it had been genuine enough. It had seemed to fill him with pity, as though it were something he might well have expected, yet dreaded, with intolerable compassion, to hear. It struck a vaguely unsatisfactory note. Sir Eustace frowned.

Then the defence finished with Mr. Higgins, having partially confused him on all points except one: regarding the time. On this, Mr. Higgins went sullen. Eight-thirty-five was the time. He had no doubt of it. He was dismissed.

Mrs. Tarrant was next called. A desiccated little gentlewoman of about fifty, she gave her evidence in a whisper, plainly in the abominable fear that whatever she said would be certain to incriminate her. It required all Sir Eustace's

cajolery to get her to admit this: Her name was Mabel Tarrant. She was a widow. She was employed in the book department of a London store. And she resided at number eleven Alexandra Street, on the ground floor. On the night of January the ninth—that being the night of the murder, which had since so plagued her sleep—she had encountered in the hall a young man. He had spoken to her.

"Mrs. Tarrant, do you recognise him in court?"

Mrs. Tarrant stole a look at the prisoner, then glanced down as if her stare might embarrass him. Pressed by Sir Eustace, she nodded. The prisoner was that young man.

"You are convinced of that?"

"Sir, I am quite convinced."

"Please tell the jury what he said to you."

"He asked me if I could direct him to the floor on which Miss Sarah Linden lived."

"And how did you reply?"

"Well, I didn't know her by name, but when he added that she was a French girl, a circus performer, of course, I knew immediately who it was he meant. I remembered Mrs. Moroni telling me of the young woman. I told him to go up to the fifth floor: room forty-two."

"And he went straight upstairs?"

"Straight upstairs."

"What time was it, do you know, Mrs. Tarrant?"

"I could not be accurate. It must have been a little after half-past eight. I can only judge it by the time I arrived at the 'Red Cockatoo'—it is a small café—for my evening meal. It is a ten-minute walk. I arrived at about quarter to nine."

"That is all, Mrs. Tarrant."

And with her departure—for the cross-examination was brief and unrevealing—the court adjourned.

When the proceedings were resumed, Nurse Manning entered the box. She was a burly woman of middle age. She was bleached of aspect and her manner was robust. She addressed Sir Eustace with some brisk deference—as if he were one of her doctors—and regarded the jury as if they were a crowd of patients' relatives to be disposed of summarily in the waiting-

room. You sensed the starch and rustle of her immaculate uniform. Her name was Moira Manning. By profession, a nurse. She served in the Princess Louise Nursing Home, Soho. Yes, she recognised the prisoner. His wife, Judith Orsini, had recently given birth to a child at her nursing home. On what date? January the ninth. And now she came with some directness to her testimony. On the evening of that date, the prisoner had spent several hours in the waiting-room. His wife had been expecting her child some time that night. It wasn't a difficult delivery, but it had been a bit prolonged and the prisoner had waited with growing anxiety. Nurse Manning, observing his agitation with sympathy, had said to him at length (so far as she could remember):

"It won't be before ten o'clock, you know. You mustn't wear yourself out. Have you had your supper?"

He had answered, "No."

"Then why don't you go out and have it? Now, run along. Everything's going splendidly and it'll take your mind off it if you get yourself a meal."

He didn't seem to care to, but after a moment or two he sighed and said, all right. He really couldn't keep still, he said. He'd go out and get some fresh air. He'd be back later on.

He went? Yes. The time? It was seven-thirty, Nurse Manning said. Yes, she would say he was in a state of tension, a very natural state of tension when he left. A first child. Every husband was like that. She did not see him again until ten o'clock. But when he returned she was shocked at his appearance.

"In what way, Nurse Manning?"

"I felt he must have been in some accident. He was very agitated. There was a bad scratch on the left side of his face. I took hold of his arm and said, 'What on earth have you done to your face?' "

"What did he say to that?"

"Nothing at first. I don't think he heard me, and when I repeated it he put his hand up to his cheek, the scratched cheek, and said, 'Oh, it's nothing, nothing.' I said, 'You haven't been fighting with someone, have you?' " Nurse

Manning added confidentially, "Prospective fathers sometimes go a little peculiar while they're waiting, they go out and have a drink and make fools of themselves. I wanted to attend to his face but he brushed it aside and only wanted to hear about his wife. I told him he was the father of a grand little chap, seven and a half pounds—the son and heir had come along a bit sooner than expected, exactly at nine o'clock, and his wife was going along fine."

"What did he do?"

Here, Nurse Manning looked opaquely at the jury: then, directly, yet with some curious affection, at the prisoner.

"He just sat down and cried."

The jury seemed to stir.

"Now, Nurse Manning. Will you tell the jury what was the condition of his clothes."

"Oh, quite all right. It was all on his face. His manner. And the scratch."

"Reverting to that. It was newly-inflicted?"

She answered with asperity, "Well, it wasn't there when he left."

"Quite." Sir Eustace's mouth tightened into a thin smile. A capable woman. She made a good impression. If ever he were incapacitated, he wouldn't mind being in Nurse Manning's hands.

The cross-examination stressed this: might not Nurse Manning have rather exaggerated the prisoner's agitation? She admitted, perhaps she had. After all, were not all prospective fathers somewhat erratic? Well—and she smiled—she didn't deny that a lot of anxious husbands *did* get themselves into all sorts of scrapes! They really didn't know what they were doing half the time. The remark was well-intentioned but its effect was odd. Some of the jurors looked vaguely at the accused.

And now a quiet, grey-haired gentleman came into the box. He carried a portfolio. He was sworn. Sir Eustace examined him.

"Sir Wilfred Ransome, you are a registered medical practitioner and Honorary Pathologist to the Home Office?"

"I am."

"On January the eleventh, did you conduct a post-mortem examination on the body of a young woman at the City Mortuary in the presence of police officers?"

Sir Wilfred confirmed it. He identified the young woman as Sarah Linden. As to the results of the post-mortem: extreme pressure had been applied to the throat. The bruises on her arms were consistent with a severe struggle. "She must have been very nearly strangled. The bruises were indicative of great violence. I wouldn't care to say more than that."

Sir Eustace continued,

"Now, Sir Wilfred. Would you tell the jury of anything else that came to your notice during the post-mortem?"

"I discovered traces of skin-tissue under the nails of the deceased's right hand."

"Human tissue?"

"Yes, human."

"Were you able to identify the blood content?"

"I identified it as group A.2."

"Is that a common type of blood, Sir Wilfred?"

"No. It is rather rare. Only about one-tenth of the population possesses it."

"That is very explicit, Sir Wilfred. Now were you given a sample of blood submitted by the prisoner?"

"I was."

"What did you find?"

"It was of the same group, A.2."

"That is all, Sir Wilfred."

No cross-examination followed that.

And so Detective-Inspector Holloway was called. He was a very fat man. He said that he was attached to the West Central division, London. He had found certain photographs in the deceased's room, mostly of herself, but one showed her, seemingly before a circus performance, with two men. He had shown it to Mrs. Tarrant and she had recognised one of the men on the photograph—the younger of the two—as the one she had talked to in the hall. The photograph was marked on the back with the name of a Marseilles newspaper. He'd discovered that it had been taken there, about a year ago, at a

circus belonging to Mr. Pat Chantry. This gentleman was well-known in the circus world. The Detective-Inspector had then interviewed Mr. Chantry. Mr. Chantry had at once identified the younger man on the photograph. His name was Tino Orsini. He was his son-in-law.

The following morning, the Detective-Inspector visited the accused. He asked him if he knew the deceased. He said he did. He had gone to see her last night. She had once been a close friend. But she'd been in an emotional state and had quarrelled with him, so he left. He had walked about the streets until about ten, when he returned to the nursing home where his wife lay.

The Detective-Inspector had checked the times of departure and return of the prisoner at the nursing home and had been told by Nurse Manning of his general condition, also about the injury to his face. He had since received a report from the Home Office pathologist. Thereupon, he had visited the prisoner again. He had asked him to be more explicit about his movements during his absence from the nursing home.

"Did you first caution him?"

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"He said he'd told me everything he knew. He had gone to see Miss Linden by taxi, he couldn't say what time, perhaps about eight-thirty, and had gone away after ten minutes, no more. She was alive and well when he left her. He said, 'I didn't do it. I could never have harmed her, not if I'd tried.' I then asked him how he'd come by the scratch on his face."

"And he answered . . .?"

"He said Miss Linden had done it."

On the fourteenth of January, acting upon information received, the Detective-Inspector had arrested the prisoner at his home, charging him with the murder of Sarah Linden.

The prisoner replied, "I am not guilty."

And so ended the first day of the trial.

On his way home, Sir Eustace read the newspapers. They were full of the trial. It was not hard to see that the bizarre quality of the case, its circus background perhaps, would

inevitably catch the public imagination; topics of national importance had been crowded off the front pages in order to make room for blatant photographs and verbatim reports of the proceedings. Coming from the austere atmosphere of the court, the reports seemed to Sir Eustace to have been distastefully melodramatized. He smiled grimly. Let it but have a twist of eccentricity, the fanciful colouring of a novelette!—and it was the insignificant that appealed to the public, bent to their papers as they swayed in buses and railway carriages on their way home. But Sir Eustace wondered how many of them would care to visualize the ultimate scene to which the trial must lead: the naked glare of the executioner's shed. Would that be so palatable? Ninnies! Let them put themselves in the other man's shoes. They would know what it was like to follow the case from the wrong side of the fence.

He spent a restless evening. His butler, unperturbed, took the edge of his mood. It was Sir Eustace's habit to dismiss utterly from his mind the day's proceedings; but he found it less easy now. He could not banish the dark half-formed pictures that crowded into his thoughts. After dinner, he sat in his study, before a blazing fire, nursing his tumbler of brandy. He picked up a newspaper. His attention was taken by a picture of the accused; how the press had got hold of it they alone knew, but it showed Orsini in his circus tights and doublet, turned fleetingly to the flashlight with a smile on his face. Sir Eustace stared. Tom, Tom. It was uncanny. It was with an effort that he moved his eyes to the framed photograph of his dead son, taken in uniform on leave, only a month before those damnable compatriots of the prisoner had captured him and maltreated him to death. Sir Eustace's lips felt stiff. He tried again to banish the case from his mind. It was really wearying him. To-morrow he would reach his cross-examination of the prisoner—for the defence would certainly put him into the box, though it were no more than the gesture of a drowning man seizing at a straw—and then, no doubt, a lot more would be revealed. The motive, perhaps. What could it have been? Desire? Jealousy? Frustrated passion? Well, to-morrow would show.

And he sat there, as the fire died, into the late hours, thinking of Tom, of those distant halcyon days of school holidays and fishing trips and their travels abroad. Ah, life would have been a lot different if only Tom had come through. He was a lonely man. What had been kind and generous in him lay somewhere in Tuscany—in an unnamed mound in some forgotten prison camp; for the Red Cross had never traced his boy's grave. He rose after midnight, unaccountably tired, and went to bed.

The second day of the trial commenced with the calling of Pat Chantry. He made a good figure in the box, a hard-bitten man, cool and forthright. He told of the prisoner's acquaintance with the dead girl. It had been fond, yes, he knew. Deeper than that? There was a desperate honesty about the man. Well, perhaps deeper, yes. He thought they had been in love. But it had all ended when the prisoner was concerned in a bad accident, falling during a performance and severely injuring his back. That was when the deceased girl had gone off with Orsini's partner, a man named Ribble—yes, he was the man with the crutch seen on the photograph—and they had never set eyes on her again. So far as the prisoner was concerned, they were all convinced that the affair was finished. He had said so himself: Pat Chantry remembered his very words, "All over! All burned out!" If he'd not been certain of it, he would never have let Orsini marry his daughter. He had been a wonderful husband, truly devoted to her. They had been very happy. The witness seemed rather affected. He turned to the prisoner in the dock and a soft smile, not untouched by tears, passed between them. So he left the box.

There then passed through the box the most motley collection of oddities Sir Eustace had ever seen. They were the circus folk. A woman horse-rider—a Russian—a huge brown man with long hair and flashing teeth and an Eastern name: Chang. He trained tigers, he said. A clown and a tumbler. They all said the same. An affair between the prisoner and the dead girl? What of it? They were young people, it was a sweet

affectionate romance, and it had come quickly to an end. They knew Tino Orsini well, he was a good and generous young man—he just did not have it in him to bear malice. They'd all been assured that the love was over. This business was unbelievable. They were frequently reproved and checked by the judge, but not unkindly; for they all spoke in broken English, and their vehement feelings tended to run away with them. But they were not so effective as they might have seemed. They made the mistake of over-emphasis. And Sir Eustace studied the jury carefully. He guessed what was passing through their minds. A vagabondish lot; and foreigners, every one. Of course, they would stand by the accused! But look at them: they weren't really people, they were eccentrics, what reliance could you put in creatures that wandered about in caravans, sleeping under the sky, making their living by leaping about circus tents? And how they jabbered! They were so volatile.

It was the last of these—the last witness for the prosecution, in fact—who caused the greatest stir. And though the man (a clown, by the way) gave his story a careless indifferent touch, as though it were of no real significance, it did the prisoner no good at all. It was, for him, a most unfortunate link in the chain of evidence. This person came into the box and, on being sworn, stated that his name was Beppo. His surname? He had none. If his parents had ever given him one he'd forgotten it. Just Beppo, he said. He was a simple sort of man, and spoke with a French accent, so clumsily that sometimes his words made only gibberish. But your mind leapt to the occasion, and you saw him for a moment in the fantastic baggy trousers, all stripes and monstrosity, and the paint-streaked faces of the buffoons you saw tumbling about the sand at Christmas-time at Olympia. He had gone to visit Tino Orsini on the morning of January the ninth. The day of the murder, yes. He went because he thought Tino would like a few cheery words from an old friend, someone to hold his hand —well, it was a very upsetting business for a young chap, wasn't it, waiting for his first child to be born? And then, quite casually, he'd told Tino (he would not refer to him as the

prisoner) that who had he bumped into yesterday but Sarah Linden?

There was a curious hush in the court.

"You met her by accident?"

"By accident. I am going down—say the name of the street again——?"

"Alexandra Street?"

"—Alexandra Street, when a girl comes out of a building, tenements or something, and the way she walks, I know her at once. Sarah Linden! We stop and talk. What is she doing now? Looking for work. I ask her about Mike Ribble, the man she went off with, and she looks at me—oh, so strangely!—and says nothing. Then she just whispers. He is in Paris, she says. I surmise to myself. As I thought! He has given her the chuck." (The judge reminded him that they were not here to listen to his opinions—but this Beppo creature merely looked at him blandly and appeared not a whit put out.) "She looks peculiar. Cast down. She does not want to talk to me, I see—too many memories! So I go. Good-bye! I do not expect ever to see her again. I tell it to Tino. I think we might have a laugh."

"What did the prisoner say when you told it to him?"

"He listens. He asks me: how does she look? Well? And happy? I smile. Not much money, from the look of her—and happy? *Tiens!* Not to my eye! Poor Tino. He is quite upset. After all, he was once so fond of her. Then before I go, he says, Beppo, where was it you met her? I tell him. I give him the address of the building in which she lives. And that is all. Who is interested? I say, cheer up, *mon ami*, soon you will be the father of a fine young trapezist, in a few years you will be training him yourself to swing from the bars! I go."

And then this Beppo burst out, "It is all madness, this business! Tino could not have hurt a fly. We know him. You do not. You are making a terrible mistake."

He was brought to order. Cross-examined. And he left. Before he did so, he turned in the box, raised his arm to the prisoner and smiled encouragingly. He may have been ready to call out to him, but he was touched on the shoulder and told to

go. As for the prisoner, he smiled softly and with the tiniest lift of his hand made a greeting. To Sir Eustace's eye, there was something in it of an inevitable farewell.

And with that, Sir Eustace swept up his papers, turned to the judge and said:

"My Lord, that is the case for the prosecution."

He sat.

When, after lunch, the prisoner entered the box to be examined by counsel in his defence, it was not thought that he could now much alter the shape of the case. He would, at most, offer some mitigating circumstances, not yet revealed, so that ultimately defending counsel might throw himself upon the mercy of the court. But they would have to be very telling if he was to take his neck out of hazard of the rope. The case against him was rigorous; Sir Eustace didn't see how the jury could but accept it beyond the shadow of a doubt. Oh, they might have their qualms. The prisoner was young. It wouldn't be easy to consign him to his unavoidable end. Indeed, it was difficult to connect him with so brutal and callous a crime. But in the long run, even with the most hesitant of juries, the harsh reality of facts told. Who could dispute them here? And, no doubt, their minds would turn—with real pity, too—to the girl who had been so cruelly done out of her life.

As the prisoner stepped into the box, he was regarded keenly by all eyes. He was pale as he took the oath. He gave his testimony in a low voice, firm yet detached. In fact, it was that remote manner of his that was so baffling. Frankly, Sir Eustace queried whether, with the jury, it was doing him much good. A man at grips with his fate demanded some sympathy: and though, on occasions during the trial, he had suffered undeniably—could you doubt it?—this fellow, with a queer resignation, seemed already to have withdrawn from them all. An elusive chap. Yet he was skilfully led. Counsel skated delicately over some very thin ice. But his story remained nebulous. And Mr. Justice Roper, who was following it with a curiously compassionate intensity—they all saw it—was frowning. It wasn't the best of signs.

However, Sir Eustace didn't intend to dwell on all that. He fancied that it was his cross-examination that had been revealing. He'd meant to get at the facts—and he had. Harsh? So be it: he'd been harsh. He'd felt himself driven on. And not in his best forensic vein. How else could you pin the fellow down? He could slip so easily right out of your grasp. Let them say what they liked! There hadn't been much left of the prisoner's case when he was finished with him.

He had started by clearing up the facts around the prisoner's association with the girl.

"Orsini, will you please tell the jury where you first met the deceased?"

"At Marseilles."

"That was where she joined the circus?"

"Yes."

"She was liked by everybody?"

"Everybody."

"And it was there that you grew attached to her?"

"Yes."

"Would you say that your affection for her was returned?"

"In her own way—it was."

"Passionately so?"

The prisoner hesitated. For a moment, he looked strange. Nostalgically, was he thinking back?

"As much as she was capable of. It was like asking the wind in the air—or the sky—to be in love with you. It was so natural. She gave just what she had to give."

(Now what were ordinary people to think of that? Let the jury make of it what they could.) But Sir Eustace pursued.

"Now I must ask you this, Orsini. Were you lovers?"

He looked down. He answered faintly,

"We were very fond of each other."

"That doesn't quite answer my question. I think you understand what I mean. I am suggesting that your relations were not simply platonic, but intimate in the fullest sense of the word. Is that correct?"

The prisoner's face had gone quite haunted. He lifted his eyes; they begged.

"Is it necessary? She's dead. Let her be. What's the point of it?"

"I fear I must press you. Were you lovers?"

"Yes."

"That is what I wanted to know. Now you told the jury that the association between you ended when you had a bad accident—whilst you were in hospital she went away?"

"Yes."

"With another man? Your partner, you remember you told the court?"

"That's so."

"Are we to presume that it came to you as a very grevious shock?"

"Well, it did."

"You felt it was cruel, did you—that she should have gone off in such circumstances? When you were so badly injured?"

"She couldn't help it."

"That may be. But it would have been only human on your part if you'd felt betrayed. What, then, was your reaction? Anger?"

"No."

"You are telling the court that you felt no resentment? No bitterness?"

"Nothing like that. Why should it be so strange? What else is love? I wanted only what was best for her."

Most altruistic! Was it not? Well, it would require a good deal more to convince a jury that such sentiments were genuine; not many people found human nature as forbearing as that. And, frigidly, Sir Eustace pressed hard upon the point. The seeds of the crime lay in the past—it had grown out of that circus association: that much was clear—and he had no intention of permitting the prisoner to evade it, whether out of a natural aversion to revealing his emotions or (what was much more likely) fear of what might transpire. The effect upon the prisoner was harassing. At length, he cried out:

"I knew it was all over! I felt it had all been blazed out of me. I just couldn't torment myself any more!"

"You will admit then that it gave you some torment?"

"Yes. It did. It's true."

Here, Mr. Justice Roper creaked disapprovingly, "The prisoner had tried to express his attitude. You are straining the issue, are you not, Sir Eustace? Let it stand."

And with the jury, indeed, it would. They had eyes: let them look at the prisoner. They'd draw less charitable conclusions, Sir Eustace thought.

"As your Lordship pleases. Now let us get on. You told the jury that you have always been connected with circus life?"

"I was born into it."

"And you were fond of it?"

"Oh, yes. It was all I wanted. It was a wonderful life."

"But your unfortunate accident put an end to your career as a performer?"

"Yes."

"You could never work again? Not actively?"

"No. Never."

"It was distressing to you?"

"Of course."

"And when the deceased left you—at that very time—will you say that you did not connect her in your mind with the misfortune?"

"How could I blame her for that?"

"Quite so. I merely asked for your assurance." (But Sir Eustace threw a keen glance at the prisoner. His expression, for an instant, had been strained. So it was not so simple! In some way, the deceased had been concerned! Oh, there was much more behind it: he could see: and he doubted now if it would ever come out.) However, "Now, Orsini. After your marriage, did Sarah Linden ever recur to your thoughts?"

"Sometimes."

"But you made no attempt to regain touch with her?"

"No. Never."

"And the first you heard of her since the day she left you was when the witness, Beppo, told you he had encountered her so surprisingly?"

"Yes, that's so."

"When did you first make up your mind to go and see her? Was it as soon as Beppo told you she was living alone?"

"No."

"Then when?"

"That night. When I walked out of the nursing home."

"Not during the day? It didn't occur to you that she was now alone, that you might be able to persuade her to renew your association?"

"No. That isn't true."

"Let me put this to you. The night you speak of, you were in the nursing home—consumed with anxiety—awaiting the birth of your child. Eventually, you went out—to use your own words—to get some fresh air. You couldn't keep still, you said. Now I put it to you. Was it not a curious moment in which to think of visiting the girl who had once been your lover?"

The prisoner sighed.

"How can I make you understand?"

"It is the jury you must make understand, not I."

Mr. Justice Roper leaned over his bench; he addressed the prisoner mildly.

"Tell the jury in your own words what brought it to your mind just then."

"I was so happy. Worried: but happy. I was waiting for my child. I felt so elated—I was at peace with the world. And then, when I went out of the nursing home—walking through the streets—Sarah came into my mind. I felt such good-will towards her. I wanted her to share my happiness. I wanted to tell her everything was forgotten! No more trouble between us. Nothing! We could shake hands and be friends. We'd been so fond of each other once. Why should there be any shadow between us now? I wanted to tell her about Judith: about our child. I was happy. I thought she might be happy too. That was why I went."

He was so fervent. His eyes shone; with tears. Curiously, Sir Eustace thought, 'Almost thou persuadest me.' But he asked dryly, "And for no other reason?"

"No. Only that."

"You insist that it was only reconciliation you sought?"

"I swear it. Yes."

"Very well. What did you do?"

"I called a taxi."

"Do you remember the time?"

"No."

"Not the time you arrived at the deceased's address?"

"No."

"You have heard Nurse Manning testify that it was seven-thirty when you left the nursing home. Can you check from that?"

"I can't. When you're in that condition—you know?—time sort of goes over your head, hours or minutes, they seem all the same."

"Just so. Now. On arrival at Alexandra Street. You have heard Mr. Higgins, the taxi-driver, give evidence as to your behaviour. Do you agree that you were somewhat agitated?"

The prisoner smiled strainedly.

"Well, I hadn't seen Sarah for so long. I didn't know what to expect."

"But you were naturally discomposed?"

Again that troubled smile.

"I'll bet I was, yes."

"And you see no reason to contradict Mr. Higgins' testimony?"

"No. Why should I? I'm sure it's true."

A complex creature: was he not? So damaging to himself, yet with an ingenuous assurance that must be giving the jury to think. They were studying him, frowning; with knitted brows. Truly, he could take the wind out of your sails. Now Sir Eustace stressed the question of the time. The prisoner had heard Mr. Higgins state in the most definite terms that it was eight-thirty-five when he'd left him at Alexandra Street. Did he see any reason to doubt it? No. It could be true? The prisoner nodded. Of course. Very likely it was. And Sir Eustace paused.

"For your own sake, I must ask you to remember that this is a matter of some significance. You realise that, do you not? I do not wish you to damage your defence by an injudicious admission. You say that Mr. Higgins' time of eight-thirty-five was very likely true?"

"I don't want to lie. I heard what he said. I dare say he was right."

Here there was some dissension with defending counsel, who rose to modify his client's statement. It must have been exasperating to him to see such potent ammunition furnished to the crown. The prisoner watched dispassionately. He did not retract. How could he? Mr. Justice Roper questioned him, with warning; but when, at length, with a vexed expression, defending counsel sat, the time had been as good as established: eight-thirty-five.

Now the prisoner recalled meeting a woman in the hall. It had been Mrs. Tarrant. Yes, the conversation, the little he could remember of it, had been much as she said. He didn't know what room Sarah lived in. That was why he had inquired. After he'd described Sarah to her and she'd told him, he went upstairs. Had he met anybody on the stairs? No. Nobody. So he had come to Sarah Linden's door. And here the prisoner paused.

He was less tranquil now. He wiped his hands. His eyes seemed to search back with unease; he would have to re-enact those critical minutes—or as much as he would dare, for the sake of his neck, to describe—and, clearly, it was giving him distress. You heard his breath.

Sir Eustace led, "She was alone when she received you?"

"Quite alone."

"She seemed surprised to see you?"

"Very surprised."

"You told the court that all she said to you was this, 'What do you want?' "

"Yes."

"Not a very warm welcome, was it? You don't think she could have been friendlier?"

"I was a bit cast down. Perhaps—oh, I don't know—I'd expected too much. It was such a let-down. We'd been so fond of each other once."

"You then said to her——? would you refresh your memory——?"

"I said, 'Hullo, Sarah.' She just looked at me and said, 'You

shouldn't have come.' I told her I'd seen Beppo. She said Beppo talked too much. It wasn't encouraging. So I said I just wanted to talk to her for old time's sake. To see how she was getting on."

"And with that——?"

"She sort of shrugged. Oh, so indifferently. It was like cold water in one's face. She said, 'All right. You'd better come in.' I went inside."

"Did you see what she had been doing?"

"Having her supper."

"When you saw that you did not appear to be welcome, did it not occur to you to go?"

"I should have gone. I saw it was no use. Too much had happened. But—in some way—she looked unhappy. Ill. I hated to leave her so."

"You then told her about your wife? Your expected child?"

"Yes. She didn't seem to hear. She wasn't even listening. What was the use? One can feel so foolish when one has come with a full heart and you meet nothing but a face that is blank and cold. I thought: It's sad. I hardly recognised her, you see. She used to be so gay, so light-hearted. When you heard her laugh, like a bubble, it was something to make you feel warm inside. Now—she looked——"

"Well?"

"Desperate. I said, 'It's no use, Sarah. I'd better go. You don't want me here.' "

"And then——?"

The prisoner began to knit his fingers. Perhaps none but Sir Eustace saw the film of sweat on his brow. He gave a wry smile.

"All of a sudden she turned on me. She said Mike—that was my partner—had chucked her in Paris, he didn't want her any more, and it was all my fault, she said. She was hysterical. She said it was only me Mike cared about, nobody else—she'd come between us and now he'd thrown her off. She blamed it all on me. She was like a fury. I thought people might hear. She said she'd die without Mike, she was in love with him—I swear

she didn't know what she said. It was horrible. I felt sick. I'd never seen her so. I put my hand on her arm."

"Please speak up so that the jury can hear."

The prisoner's voice had gone faint; his face was truly ghastly now.

"And then she screamed. I didn't expect it. All of a sudden, I felt her fingers on my face and when I put my hand to my cheek, there was blood on it."

"You were staggered?"

"Yes."

"But you told the jury you struggled with her?"

"I couldn't control her. I wanted to restrain her. She wasn't herself, she was out of her mind."

"Did you knock anything down?"

"I?"

"In the struggle?"

"I don't remember. Perhaps a chair. I held her—then suddenly all the anger went out of her, she seemed to collapse and she sank into a chair and began to cry."

"Now what did you do?"

"I looked at her. I couldn't catch my breath. I don't know what I felt. Sick: just sick. This was Sarah. I don't deny it. I'd loved her once. I wiped my face. And all the time she sat there weeping as if her heart would break."

"You went to her, did you?"

"Yes. I think—yes, I did—I put my hand on her hair. I said, 'I'm sorry, Sarah.' She said, 'Please go.' I turned and went."

"During the struggle, did you approach the window?"

"Perhaps."

"The window was open? It was a french window, you remember?"

"Open, yes."

"Did you tear down the curtain?"

"No."

"You are quite sure? Not as you fought?"

"Quite sure."

"You did not knock over the table-lamp and crush the shade

with your feet? You did not hear the bulb break? You have heard the room described, the results of the struggle. All this must have caused some commotion, surely?"

"Nothing like that happened."

"Do you wish to see the photographs taken by the police? It might refresh your memory. You are at liberty to give the matter some thought."

"I tell you, nothing like that happened."

"Then I must put it to you that in the heat of the moment it did, in fact, happen that all this débris was caused as you fought with her. That, when she scratched you, you were enraged——"

"No."

"Not horrified? Was it not dreadful to you?"

"Yes."

"But the struggle was violent?"

"Only for a bit. She soon calmed down."

"I suggest to you that she was frantic, she had begun to scream, and you put your hands to her throat—I am not suggesting that you knew what you were doing—but that, in order to silence her, you did actually catch her by the throat?"

"No. I didn't."

"You remember that much?"

"I couldn't have done it. And I didn't, I say."

"Orsini, I must put it to you that you struggled on to the balcony, you and the deceased, and that it was you and no one else whom Mrs. Moroni saw throw Sarah Linden to her death."

"I did not."

"And I am suggesting this to you in the plainest terms: you did not, in fact, go to tell the deceased what you have told us, about your wife, your expected child: it was no kindly memories for old time's sake: when you heard from Beppo that she was in London, alone, you were driven to renew your association and it was for that purpose, and no other, that you visited her."

"No."

"You ask the jury to believe that the struggle, and it was undoubtedly violent—the jury can see for themselves, from the

photographs, the police depositions, just how violent it was—was not caused by her rejection of your advances?"

"I can only tell you: it wasn't. All that happened was just what I said."

Again defending counsel, who had been on edge, rose with some sharply-worded protest—a quite tedious dissension—and by the time Mr. Justice Roper had given his ruling, the prisoner had regained his composure. So that when the judge, observing him keenly, said, "If the accused wishes, the court will adjourn for a few moments while he recovers himself," the prisoner replied, "No, sir. I'm all right." Sir Eustace went on:

"Very well. You told the jury that when the deceased left you—in Marseilles, that was—you felt that your affection for her had gone; it had all been burned out, you said."

"Yes."

"Will you now tell the jury that when you next saw her in her room in Alexandra Street, on January the ninth, you still felt that you were not in love with her?"

Sir Eustace would not easily forget the prisoner's face. Hauntedly, he searched Sir Eustace's eyes. He looked down. He did not reply. Sir Eustace waited. He did not press him. (Why, indeed? The answer was clear.) Mildly, he proceeded:

"Now, after all that ensued in the room, you went away?"

"Yes."

"How long had you been with her—from the moment you arrived?"

"About ten minutes. It couldn't have been more."

"Accepting Mr. Higgins' statement as to the time of your arrival—that would have put your departure at not later than ten minutes to nine?"

"Yes. That's so."

"Now you know that we have been able to place the time of the murder with great accuracy? It occurred at precisely nine o'clock. Those ten minutes between the time you say you went and the time of the murder, you appreciate, are vital? Where did you go?"

"Outside."

"Just so. Exactly where?"

"I don't know. One thing coming on top of another, I was terribly upset. I walked through the streets."

"But you can give some idea where?"

"No. I just walked and walked. I was in a daze. I remember holding my face—it was bleeding—and just walking. I remember lighted streets. Crowds. Then dark streets. That's all."

"Orsini, you may think me somewhat forthright, but I assure you I want to give you every opportunity of supporting your defence. Our only duty is to arrive impartially at the facts. Surely you realise that a difficult position is created by your inability to account for your movements at that most significant time? Think again. Did you meet anyone? Anyone who might identify you?"

"No."

"Did you enter some restaurant? Any public place at all?"

"No."

"You are aware that the police have tried without success to establish your movements?"

"Yes."

"That they have been unable to trace anyone who saw you?"

"Yes."

"In effect then, at ten minutes to nine, you walked out of Sarah Linden's apartment—and until you reappeared at the nursing home, in this great metropolis, so thronged with people, you were simply swallowed up? You disappeared, as it were, from the ken of men?"

"Something like that."

"I must put it to you in the bluntest possible manner that this story is a most difficult one to accept. And that, in fact, it is the sheerest fabrication."

"No. It's true."

Sir Eustace permitted himself a shrug. Really! But he continued to examine him closely on the point. Its crucial significance was clear to everyone in the court; Mr. Justice Roper interrupted, keenly questioning the prisoner again and again; he stressed its seriousness. But—as Sir Eustace himself had put it—he simply left you with this: the streets of London

had swallowed him up. (Unless—and who could doubt it?—he'd been in the girl's apartment at the time and he knew that to admit it would inevitably damn him. As, of course, it would.)

Now Sir Eustace approached the end.

"So at some time that night you decided to return to the nursing home?"

"Yes. I saw it was nearly ten. All of a sudden I knew it was time to go back."

"You have heard Nurse Manning describe your appearance, your agitation. She then told you that you had become the father of a child?"

"Yes."

"And she says—quite simply—you sat down and cried."

"It was a bit foolish . . . but that was how I felt."

"An overwhelming emotion?"

"Yes."

"Of fatherhood?"

"Oh, yes."

"And she told you at what time your child had been born?"

"Yes. At nine o'clock."

"Orsini, isn't it possible that your emotion was due to something else?"

The prisoner may have sensed what was coming; for he half lifted his hand.

"Because—there and then—in the most macabre manner, with horror and distress, you realised that at the very instant one life had been banished from the world, by the same agency another had been ushered in?"

He should not have said it. The prisoner winced. And audibly, Mr. Justice Roper creaked on his bench. He stared at Sir Eustace malevolently. "That was a most improper remark, Sir Eustace. What is the purpose of such prejudicial comment? I shall direct the jury most strongly to ignore it." Sir Eustace looked down his nose. There was an uneasiness in the court; he felt, rather than saw, his junior, Mr. Barrow, stir uncomfortably. He'd always abjured such petty theatricals in the past. What had obsessed him to employ one so crudely

now? Well: it would not affect the issue. He did not look discomposed when he resumed the cross-examination, but he knew that he was too shaken to continue it for long. Inside, he seethed. This was his last point:

"The jury have been told that your accident permanently ended your active circus career. It has been suggested that, physically, you would never have been able to do what the murderer actually did. Are you as disabled as that, would you say?"

"Well, I can't work on the ropes again."

"But surely that implies a most strenuous physical strain. You can undertake most normal duties? Do you assist in your father's wine shop?"

"Sometimes."

"Involving the shifting of heavy cases of bottles on occasion?"

"I've done it."

"Without damage to yourself?"

"Well—yes."

"In other words, you are hardly an invalid? And what most men can do, you can do?"

The prisoner stared at him. Then he gave the tiniest wry smile.

"I suppose so, yes."

"Thank you. That is all. I have finished with the witness, my Lord."

Sir Eustace rested before making his closing speech for the prosecution. He was once more reserved. His frigidity was marked. It was a masterly address and, indeed, restored to some extent his air of impartiality. He reviewed objectively the evidence. It spoke for itself. Of course, it was circumstantial. But it was obdurate: it had not been contradicted by the defence, not on any vital point. He thought the prisoner's relations with the deceased were very relevant. Might not the jury think it was a singularly unfortunate circumstance that had drawn the prisoner to the girl's room that night? He had made no attempt to get in touch with her for a long time. Yet he had gone to see her as soon as he had been told by Beppo that she was alone—presumably abandoned by the man she

had left him for. It may have been that he had gone to see her in a spirit of kindly remembrance. But the jury would have to consider whether another motive was not involved. The prisoner and the dead girl had been lovers. That fact was not disputed. The jury had heard the testimony of the circus performers—the admission of the prisoner himself. Of course, such people were a little more emotional and over-charged than most. But facts had to be met. And while the prisoner's manner at the nursing home was quite explainable—a natural anxiety—there was no denying that when he left he had been in anything but a normal mood. As for the time of his arrival at the girl's room—some twenty minutes before the murder—that had been sufficiently proved. The jury had heard the prisoner's account of his meeting with the girl. Was it plausible? The circumstances were certainly odd. But they had led to a struggle—that was not gainsaid—and whether or not it was due to what the prisoner said, or some other reason, was for the jury to decide. They must consider that it had been violent. The prisoner's face had been severely scratched. It may have been caused by some strange fury on the part of the girl, or it may have been in self-defence—as, perhaps, passionately she fought for her life. The jury had heard Mrs. Moroni's terrible description of her death. The jury must fit this into the general picture. They had heard the prisoner state that he left the girl, alive and well, some ten minutes after he arrived. But, at nine o'clock, when she was murdered, he cannot vouch for himself. He had already disappeared from human ken. It is an unhappy circumstance, is it not?—that he can produce no trace of his movements; the streets, he tells you, swallowed him up—he was dazed and distressed and bleeding and he did not know where he went. He just walked and walked. He becomes as lost as the ripples in a pond after a stone is thrown. With all the sympathy one must accord him, it must be admitted that it hardly helps his case. And finally—when at last he reappears at the nursing home at ten o'clock—his manner is agitated and wild. Nurse Manning's testimony, honestly given, was dreadfully concise. No, in Sir Eustace's opinion, the evidence was insurmountable. It compelled one

verdict only. "It is for the prosecution to lay before you the facts," he concluded. "That I have endeavoured to do. The prosecution seeks no victory. But your verdict must be given on evidence, and evidence alone. If you are satisfied that there is a reasonable possibility that the prisoner was not the man who was seen by Mrs. Moroni to throw Sarah Linden to her death, then you must unfailingly acquit him. It is your bounden duty. But it is the submission of the prosecution that, upon this evidence, he was indeed that man, and that the only verdict which can properly be returned is a verdict of guilty of murder."

He sat.

There followed the final address for the defence. It was somewhat impassioned. It appealed to the heart, rather than the head: and, in this sense, it was good: there was no other recourse. Defending counsel wasn't unaware of the frailty of his case. Sir Eustace wondered: what was it he sought so evasively: a verdict of manslaughter? He would not get it. It was one or the other. The rope or acquittal. And there was not a man in the court who could not guess which it would be. It was an admirable speech; moving in its closing terms. A life lay in the jury's hands, and if any doubt existed in their minds they dared not take the awful responsibility of despatching it to its doom.

And so Mr. Justice Roper summed up. That some unspoken sympathy existed in him for the accused, all of them sensed; the compassion of great age for youth. But he was primarily a legal machine, and he placed the evidence before the jury with acrid fairness. He could do no other.

At thirty minutes past three, the jury retired. An hour and ten minutes later, they returned to the court.

It was always a moment of distressful suspense. As they filed into their places, Sir Eustace observed them narrowly. It had been said that if the jury avoided looking at the prisoner, the verdict was against him. Sir Eustace did not for a moment believe it; but, for all that, he noted that not one of the jurors turned his eyes to the man in the dock. And the female jurors looked ill.

Then ensued:

Clerk of the Court, "Members of the jury, are you agreed upon the verdict?"

The Foreman, "We are."

Clerk of the Court, "Do you find the prisoner, Tino Orsini, guilty or not guilty of murder?"

The Foreman, "We find him guilty."

Clerk of the Court, "You find him guilty of murder and that is the verdict of you all?"

The Foreman, "It is."

Clerk of the Court, "Prisoner at the bar, you stand convicted of murder. Have you anything to say why the court should not give you judgment of death according to law?"

The prisoner, pale, standing, seemed to hesitate. But, quietly, he answered, "No, sir."

Thereupon, and with evident emotion, Mr. Justice Roper addressed him.

"Tino Orsini, after a long and patient trial, and upon the most ample evidence, you have been found guilty of a singularly cruel crime. I must agree with that verdict. I do not presume to judge you. I am but a minister of the law and it remains for me now to pass upon you the only sentence which the law allows."

Mr. Justice Roper's voice shook. An old man; he would not see many more such trials. As he glanced at the prisoner, facing him with such attention, it seemed to Sir Eustace that there were tears in his eyes.

The judge then delivered sentence of death.

Before he left the dock, the prisoner looked round the court. It may have been that he sought Sir Eustace's eyes; for when he found them, the glance held; and then he did the most inexplicable thing. He nodded and ever so faintly smiled. Sir Eustace felt empty; of emotion, of triumph; he sat with curiously enfeebled limbs. Then the prisoner was tapped upon the shoulder, he glanced at the clock, turned, and was gone.

Sir Eustace could talk to nobody. He collected his papers grimly and, as soon as he could, hurried out of the court.

Well, he had told it; not all; only the superficial. And now

he found that the young priest was studying him with searching eyes. Sir Eustace forced a smile. His mouth was dry. He reached for the decanter.

"So you see, it was rather inevitable. He hadn't a leg to stand on, and the verdict was the only one possible. Of course, it's a repugnant thing to see a young man sentenced to death, but one must think of the law: and of the unfortunate victim too."

He saw the priest stir. All this time, he had not uttered a solitary word. He had sat with such rigid absorption, never removing his keen glance from Sir Eustace's face. He looked strange. Had he guessed? Perhaps he had sensed something of Sir Eustace's inner violence—though Sir Eustace knew that, in describing the trial, not once had he even raised his voice. Now, suddenly, he felt unbearably tired. He only wanted the fellow to go. But he could not resist asking in that dry voice of his:

"Well, there you have it. Have you gleaned anything?"

"Yes."

"And what, pray?"

And then the priest gave him a curious look, a smile, and got up. "Don't you know?"

Sir Eustace's mouth went down at the corners. He looked into his glass. "I'm glad to have been of service."

"Thank you. You have."

Francis found his hat. He merely asked one more thing. "Wasn't there a blind man in the evidence somewhere?"

"Blind man? Why do you ask?"

"It was something Orsini mentioned to me . . . there was so little time. Just a whisper."

Sir Eustace could not disguise his weariness.

"Then I suggest you must have misheard him. I cannot imagine what he could possibly have meant."

And since Sir Eustace did not rise, Francis went to the door. There he turned and looked back at the barrister who seemed already to have banisned him from his thoughts. A peculiar man. Did he really think he had hidden the vehemence that had convulsed him at times? What was behind it? Then he

saw that Sir Eustace was staring blankly at the photograph of a young man, a dark smiling young man in army uniform. The look was so fixed that Francis was tempted to ask him who it was. But he was lost to Sir Eustace. A log fell in the fire. It flared with a hiss. Neither of them moved. Silently, Francis went.

When Sir Eustace heard the door close he made an effort to fill his glass: he must get to bed. But for a long time he sat staring at the photograph, and beyond it, into a crowded court: and he knew that he would have to take a tablet; sleep would elude him for a long time that night.

THE DETECTIVE

THURSDAY evenings at the Holloways' were given over to bridge. The Detective-Inspector was devoted to the game; a fanatic, Mrs. Holloway said. But if Thursday evenings were holy to the game, they could also be uncommonly fierce. The Detective-Inspector was, like so many fat men, placid by nature, but when an argument sprang up over a rubber he was easily inflamed. Then you had the feeling that he might burst like a vast fleshy balloon. Why, some of the card sessions broke up in a bedlam: really, Mrs. Holloway had to warn her husband indulgently that he'd end up on the wrong side of the law. Would that be a nice thing for a policeman? Of course, George—George was her brother, and with his wife, Mildred, came round on these Thursday evenings to make up the four—could be awfully provoking. He was a motor-car salesman. He had the airy back-slapping manner of his kind, a bit patronising, you know, and when Walter (Walter was the Detective-Inspector's Christian name) played an indiscreet hand, he commented on it with the smug condescension of a dealer ("I'm no mug, you know!") who has just been offered a ten-year old wreck in part exchange. And he was (as Walter put it) a bit of a "barrack-room lawyer"—though come to think of it, what was Walter?—and he quoted Culbertson at you, unctuously, just like a parson seeking support from Holy Writ. This infuriated Walter. So the inquests after every rubber were apt to be vulgar. Vulgar? Disgustingly coarse. A good husband and a fine father, Walter could indulge in language that only a man habituated to dealing with criminals would be likely to know. However, the two women—Mrs. Holloway and Mildred—were used to all this sound and fury; and while the arguments raged they just discussed on the

sidelines, as it were, the latest sales-bargains and the pleasantly-scandalous gossip that both of them adored.

To-night (being Thursday, of course), supper was over and they'd settled down to the game. There was beer on the sideboard for George and Walter and sandwiches for Mildred. As for Mrs. Holloway, she just indulged in a caramel, having a nice sweet tooth. They had been playing for fifteen minutes and there had been no outbreaks yet. In fact, although Mrs. Holloway had just been unfortunate enough to revoke, her husband did not put his sharp little eyes on her maliciously and insult her, as he usually did—he merely clicked his tongue and tut-tutted under his breath. Now wasn't that nicer? He must be in a mild humour to-night. So Mrs. Holloway felt cosy. She stole a fond look at her husband. Oh, he was no pattern-plate! He was easily the fattest man she'd ever seen. He'd been big ("well-made," she told herself) when she married him as a sergeant in the C.I.D. But in the last few years, really, he'd piled it on! How he loved his food. So he'd gone absolutely mountainous now and Mildred had once had the cheek to say—affectionately, of course!—that he waddled rather than walked. His eyes were lost in the vast expanse of his pink face: quite like an owl's. His jowls were pendulous. His huge body was a strain on every chair in the house. His mouth was small and rosy, like a child's, but when it grew pursed in anger it could come out with an acrid fury that made you shrink. And he was shrewd—he'd walked the beat and risen from his stripes because he was smart. He knew men. He had no illusions about them. They were all potential criminals, he once put it, it depended only upon the pressure and cruelty of circumstances whether they remained straight or slipped. A cynic? Then he was a cynic. But he was the best-respected officer in the West Central division, and he expected to have his Superintendent's cap before three years were out.

His record was a shining example to every up-and-coming constable. Yes, smart, they said of Walter: smart.

But to-night he was in a really abstracted mood. He had already played two false cards. It was inexplicable; he didn't seem to be concentrating on the game. At first Mrs. Holloway

thought his ample supper might have disagreed with him, but no, he had the stomach of an ox and he was dipping absently (but with appetite) into her box of caramels. Well, she supposed, sooner or later he'd say what it was. He took his work with him everywhere: perhaps it was that. But when he mis-played so carelessly that George railed at him he did not blare out with fury, he looked at the cards and merely sighed. ("He *must* be out-of-sorts!") Mildred met Mrs. Holloway's eye. At length, George puffed out angrily:

"What the devil's wrong with you, Walter? You're playing like a fool."

"I?"

(That was odd enough: the meekness of his tone.)

"Why didn't you play your spade?"

"I didn't have one."

"What blasted nonsense," cried George. He picked up Walter's cards and thrust them under his nose.

Mildred looked at Walter's bewildered face and twinkled. She laughed, "Now don't let's have an inquest."

The Detective-Inspector looked blank. "Sorry. Suppose I haven't got my mind on the game."

"I'll say you haven't. What's wrong?" George's eyes glinted hopefully. "That juicy new murder case giving you beans?"

Mrs. Holloway expected a scowl of exasperation. The Detective-Inspector felt it improper if his family even referred to a case that was still—was this the expression?—*sub judice.* "Oh, shut up," said Mildred warningly, digging her elbow into her husband's side. But Walter passed his hand over his plump pink cheeks. He said thoughtfully, "No, not the new murder case. Quite an old one, in fact."

"Eh? Which one's that?"

"Remember that young chap, that circus fellow? Killed a girl. Orsini was his name."

"Oh, by Jove, yes. That was a jolly one."

Now the Detective-Inspector *did* scowl.

"What do you mean, jolly?"

"It was damned interesting. Yes, I followed that one up."

"A chap came to see me yesterday. A priest. He was the one who attended Orsini at the execution. Properly spoiled my day for me."

"Oh?" George looked gloatingly aroused. "Brought you a confession, did he?"

"No. The very reverse. I don't mind telling you, he got under my skin a bit," the Detective-Inspector said.

Now they all dropped the cards and stared at him with bright, intrigued eyes.

"Oh, come on," cried George. "It's all over now! Tell us. Why'd he get under your skin?"

"Oh, asking questions. I don't know that I was wise to talk to him. But he had a couple of letters from high up, asking me to extend the courtesies and all that—so I couldn't very well send him off with a flea in his ear."

Mrs. Holloway asked curiously, "What did he say?"

"Between you and me and the gate-post—and that means you, George, so hold your tongue!—he thought the chap hadn't done it. Agitated? By Christmas, he was really cut up!"

George chuckled. "Bit late in the day, wasn't he? You stretched a nice piece of rope for the chap on that case, Walter."

Here, the Detective-Inspector looked at his brother-in-law with deep disfavour. He answered stiffly, "I did my duty, no more."

"Oh, you know what I mean. Chap had it coming to him right from the start."

"You should have been there to talk to this priest."

"Crackpot," said George comfortably. "They do get a bit sentimental, these types." (George gave one of those show-room impressions of his customers that he did so well—he'd sold a car to a vicar the other week and the man hadn't left him alone for fifteen minutes since.) He turned to his wife. "Why, you sat through that Orsini case, Mildred. What did you think of it?"

And Mildred put her head on a side, examining the Detective-Inspector with her bright reflective eyes. Walter respected her.

A clever woman; much too clever for George. Not pretty, of course, pert if anything, rather like a sparrow, but he didn't mind betting her eyes didn't miss much—and that included all those blonde peccadilloes of George's he thought she knew nothing about. She answered mildly, "I never really knew."

"Eh?"

"Oh, with all that evidence against him he hadn't a hope. And his story *was* weak. Then I just looked at him and I didn't know any more." Surprisingly, she added, "He *suffered* so!"

The Detective-Inspector was confounded.

"And well he might!"

"You don't understand. I thought he was suffering for the girl, not for himself. Don't look at me as if I'm mental, Walter. I *did* watch him. He was listening as if a lot of what he heard was new to him. And every word was cutting into his heart. Honest. I simply couldn't fit him in with what he'd done."

"But he gave such a cock-and-bull story. You could blow it over!"

"Hopeless, wasn't it?"

"Well, then?"

"Oh, I'm sure he did it. But it's no use, Walter. Someone once said: the heart has its reasons that one's reason does not know. No, I simply won't argue. I can't say any more."

And the Detective-Inspector looked at her sourly, then had to smile. There was the opposite sex for you! Eh? Counsel could put forward unassailable arguments as finely-constructed as a delicate watch—but these women just looked at the chap in the dock and brushed 'em casually aside. And it was such delightfully contradictory creatures who, in this year of grace, had the vote! Then his mind went back to his visitor: the priest. He'd come forward with a point of view not vastly different from hers. Troubled instinct, no more. As if it were something you could tag and produce as an exhibit in court! How could you deal with such folk? Of course, the priest had more reason to be emotionally prejudiced; you could see what had shaken him. After all, he'd spent the last few minutes with the prisoner in his cell and it would arouse an angry sense of distress: unbalanced, naturally: but understandable. It was

such a waste of a fine young life, he thought. But the law? Was that to go to waste? Upon his soul, the Detective-Inspector felt like asking him: how did he imagine they'd get along without that? No. Incoherent thinking, at best. Now the priest's dark earnest face was in Walter's mind. He had a keen olive-skinned face, a sensitive air: a damned sight too sensitive, the Detective-Inspector thought, to make a first-class priest. They had to cultivate a skin against life too. Oh, it hadn't taken him long to sum the fellow up. He was one of those haunted visionaries, he wouldn't let go; he would worry and worry at the thing until he tore somebody's nerves to shreds! (Most likely, his own.) But being a foreigner, an American, the Detective-Inspector had received him blandly, and what with the letters of introduction the chap had, he'd given him a lot more time than he could rightly spare. He'd listened to him, smiled inscrutably (he thought), then called for the file. There was no harm in letting a visitor see what a meticulous thing a police investigation was. But if he thought the priest would be enthralled by the file and then go off content, well, he was barking up the wrong tree. The fellow'd studied everything minutely, reading every statement with care. The Detective-Inspector really couldn't keep his eyes from straying to the clock. What was his name, now? Father Francis. He'd gone over the beginnings of the case, stage by stage. Even to revive it so was to make the Detective-Inspector realise how closely-woven it was. A model of its kind!

Then the priest had fastened on that French newspaper photograph they'd found in Sarah Linden's room. The priest stared at it, devouring it intensely. It showed the girl, conscious of the camera, turning to it with a fleeting laugh. The two men—one was Orsini, the other the second partner, the chap with the crutch—weren't aware of the photographer, they were staring at each other. And then the priest had pointed out to him a peculiar thing: it was the remarkable affection that the camera had caught on the faces of the two men as they stared into each other's eyes. The Detective-Inspector hadn't really looked at that. Orsini was smiling, gently, buoyantly, and the chap with the crutch—giving the

younger fellow a lift up the ladder—was returning the smile with a soft watchfulness, a struggling tenderness that sat oddly on that sardonic face. A ravaged sort of face. You'd always look at it twice.

"So that's Mike," said the priest softly. It was as if he had caught up with an old friend.

"Eh? Oh, Ribble. You knew him?"

"I've heard so much about him, I almost feel I do. And that's the man who took Tino's girl away."

The Detective-Inspector chuckled. "Oh, a woman'll break any partnership up. Especially a woman like that."

"Look at their faces. They're like brothers. It stands out. They'd grown together, can't you see?"

"What of it?"

"Isn't it odd that Mike should never have come forward to speak for his old friend?"

"Oh, I don't know. They were finished, weren't they? And Ribble was in Paris—I shouldn't think he'd want to mix himself up in a business like this. After all, it wasn't as though he could offer any evidence material to the case." Then the Detective-Inspector looked at the priest and smiled slyly. "Anyway, just as a matter of routine we checked him up."

"Yes?"

"We got the French police to send us a report. Here. Read it yourself. On the night of the murder, Ribble was serving in a bar in Paris. That's the night-club he works in. Oh, I don't think he was any use to us. He just said he knew nothing about it and that was that."

The priest read the statement from the *Commissaire de Police* and sighed.

"So Mike said that?"

"Well, it's there, isn't it?" The Detective-Inspector added, rather brutally, "I'm sorry to be sharp with you, but it's what your people'd call an open-and-shut case!"

Yet he'd found himself a bit touched by the "lost" look on the chap's face. These earnest young sentimentalists! He'd really got himself properly worked up. Eh? Moving, in a way. Said something funny—the Detective-Inspector really couldn't

get the hang of it—about the business having to do with the pattern of his faith. So, kindly, the Detective-Inspector had had to say to him—after all, what was the use of beating about the bush?—"Let's face it! Orsini wasn't a bad sort of chap. You met him. So did I. It's human to look for excuses. But we have to go on facts. Evidence. That's the only thing that speaks in court. Now look here," the Detective-Inspector pursued bluffly. (This was the man-to-man touch. Even a priest, a Roman, knew what went on inside ordinary flesh and blood!) "We can all guess why he went up to Sarah Linden's room that night. I'm sorry, I don't want to smear the chap, he's paid for his crime and gone. But the girl was in his blood. He said the affair was over, did he? P'raps he thought so: we know better. It drew him on. It wasn't dead at all, it was like the ashes of a fire you think are out when really they're just banked down and sleeping, waiting to be fanned into flame." The Detective-Inspector thought this nicely put, he appreciated the turn of a well-balanced phrase: particularly his own. "Sex! It's the devil! Hot-blooded. It was no trifle, believe me, that love affair! They'd given it everything, the pair of 'em. And I don't mind telling you, I got a lot more out of some of those circus witnesses than was ever told in court. They tried to tell me it was innocent as nature—all that sort of guff! Well, you know how innocent it ended up. A girl thrown brutally to her death—and the chap taking the last walk to the executioner's shed. Sex!" The Detective-Inspector shrugged. He wasn't a man much given to that sort of thing, though he had four kids of his own. He was such an ungainly person, so enormous undressed, that, frankly, one part of him just stood back and watched during the indulgence and he couldn't help feeling that he must look an awful damned fool. (What was it Chesterfield had said about it? The pleasure was momentary, the position ridiculous and the expense damnable. True, true!) But the things it did to folk! An over-rated pastime. However, you couldn't, even discreetly, go into that with a celibate priest. So the Detective-Inspector permitted himself this little homily. It was good: he remembered every word of it after the priest had gone.

"Chance is a funny thing. I've often thought about this business myself. If only that fellow, Beppo, hadn't bumped into him that morning and told him that Sarah was here—well, Orsini might have been alive to-day. A nice chap on the face of it, with a damn good wife. Why, you could pass 'em in the street with the pram and sort of smile kindly to yourself. Grand family, you'd think! He might have made a good husband and father and they'd all have been as happy as the day is long. But he had to walk into Beppo. He had to be reminded of Sarah. And—well, we know what happened next."

The Detective-Inspector was quite moved by this little peroration. It had feeling: sympathy. A half-forgotten tag swam into his mind, "Fate moves in mysterious ways . . ." Or was it God? Well, the sentiment was much the same. And he looked at Francis for appreciation but all he got from him was a frozen caustic smile. Then it came to the Detective-Inspector with a slight sense of shock that secretly the priest thought him no more than a windy fool. Not unnaturally, he fumed. ("Well, what the devil *was* the chap after? Didn't he know better than to take up a busy official's time?")

But the priest only said, "Then you don't believe his story—about why he went to see Sarah that night?"

The Detective-Inspector just stared.

"After what he did to her? Of course not."

"Yet I do."

"Oh, come. Really!"

The priest gave his wry grin: that uncomfortable ghostly thing. "To me it's the most natural explanation in the world. I've heard so much about him, inside me a little of him has crept back to life." (And the chap *actually* pressed his breast as though he could feel him there!) "I know exactly how he'd act. He was an impressionable and generous young man. He had what I would call an exalted heart. When he heard about Sarah—oh, all of a sudden, right in the midst of his happiness—he felt so kindly toward her, he wanted to tell her, to make her see that all those painful memories were gone! He wanted to tell her about his child. He wanted her to share his good

fortune that night! All the distress he'd suffered—it was sublimated in his heart. I swear to you: his eyes must have shone! And if I can believe that," the priest ended softly, "I can believe everything else he said."

Now what could you make of that? A proper taradiddle. Eh? The Detective-Inspector'd defy anybody to pick the bones out of that. It was like addressing a child when, condescendingly, he smiled, "Oh, all that's right over my head. Much too subtle for me!" (And for anyone in his right senses, he thought.) "Why, hang it, even Orsini knew the game was up. Everybody in court could see it! He knew he was for it, he'd already given up the ghost." The Detective-Inspector caught rather quickly at this simile. "That's it: that's what you felt was in the dock. A ghost. He was finished. That's why he didn't fight."

The priest gave him a strange look.

"How d'you know he wanted to fight?"

(Now this was getting fantastic. Upon the Detective-Inspector's word! Priest or not, the chap was mad.)

"Well, whose neck was it? It wasn't mine!"

And after that, the Detective-Inspector feared that he became somewhat grim. He'd got a long-suffering expression into his face; with growing impatience, a bit like an exasperated prima donna, perhaps, he'd tapped with his finger-nails on his files and looked more obviously at the clock. If the chap saw it, he only smiled mockingly. He simply refused to budge.

However, at this moment, the Detective-Inspector was torn right out of his reverie by George, who was banging the card-table and shouting. It wasn't often that the Detective-Inspector could agree with George. Secretly he thought his brother-in-law a bit of an oaf, an elbow-lifting fake Harrovian (he actually wore the tie, though all he'd done was three years at Streatham Grammar School!) with a gift of the gab that was good for nothing but selling cars and persuading skittishly reluctant blondes. But on this occasion, George—clumsily as usual—had burst out with something that was very much to the point. Mildred had been provoking him.

"Well, what the devil did he go up to the girl's room for?

Eh? You tell me that. Why," George shouted—tactlessly, for this feature was not one of Mildred's best points and she knew it—"it's as plain as the nose on your face!" Then he wished he had not opened his mouth.

"No, you tell us, George," said Mildred in a silky voice. "Why do men go up to girls' rooms after dark? You should know." This was so patently a dig at George's clandestine affairs that he flushed and his eyes looked, if possible, more vacant than before. He pulled hard at his military moustache.

"Oh, hang it, we're all men and women of the world!"

"Speak for yourself, darling."

"Why, the chap went up for a spot of fun. After all, the girl was once his bit of fluff. He wanted a, you know, good old roll in the hay"—George looked at Mrs. Holloway apologetically—"and she just wasn't having any. No soap, she said! By Godfrey, she gave him a beauty on the face and he—he—well, oh, dammit, read the Sunday newspapers, you don't want me to teach you the facts of life!"

"I don't know of anyone who's better fitted for it than you."

Here, firmly, Mrs. Holloway intervened. With a chuckle, the Detective-Inspector could bet what she was thinking: she had a soft spot for her brother—after all, George couldn't *help* being so handsome! The girls simply ran after him; anyway, it was up to the wife to look away discreetly and keep the marriage intact. (The Detective-Inspector wondered how this bit of philosophy would stand up if it was *he* who went off the rails. It was easy to be lofty when it was other people's corns that hurt.) Mrs. Holloway said, "Well, I'm sure it was quite impulsive—terrible, of course, but impulsive—and now that he's gone it's his wife who'll suffer. And, of course, the child."

George had gone sullen. "Disgusting, I call it. Unnatural. Everybody thought so."

"Why?" asked Mildred.

"What, to go off for a you-know-what with another woman while his wife was bearing his kid? I'm no angel, but I do draw the line!"

"Not very rigidly, George."

The Detective-Inspector butted in: somebody had to:

Mildred was really spoiling for a scrap. He addressed George mildly.

"Oh, I don't know that it was so unnatural."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"You've had no kids. I have. Four of 'em. It's the woman who really goes through it, I know, but I don't mind telling you it's pretty hard on the husband's nerves too. If I didn't have the best wife in the world"—here the Detective-Inspector threw a chuckle at Mrs. Holloway, who smiled back indulgently—"I wouldn't mind betting I'd have been half-tempted to go off and drown the strain with another woman. You feel you can't stand another minute of it. Unpleasant: but not unnatural. It gets you like that."

"I think that's horrible," cried George. "I don't believe you."

"I don't care a damn if you do or not."

Mrs. Holloway had had enough. "We'll have another rubber," she said. (She would speak to Walter, really, he should never have brought such an unsettling business up!) She dealt. It was before his first bid that the Detective-Inspector related to them the tit-bit he'd specially been reserving for them. It was too good to let pass.

"Now I'll tell you something funny," he said. "This priest who came to see me, he really rocked me before he went. He asked me a proper one." The Detective-Inspector waited blandly for their close attention. "'I haven't heard you mention a blind man,' the fellow said."

Mildred stared. George blinked.

"What blind man?"

"That was precisely what I said to him. 'What blind man?' I asked. I thought he was having me on. But, no, he was dead serious: staring at me hard. I said, 'There was no blind man connected with it. What's all this about?' Seems the prisoner said something to him in his cell before he walked into the shed. About justice or something—I don't properly recall—being like the blind man he saw that night. Well, confound it, the prisoner was half-cocked at the time! You can imagine what he was going through, and I don't suppose the priest really heard what he said. I had to let him read every one of

the prisoner's own statements before he'd believe me that there wasn't a blind man within ten miles of the case."

Mildred—just like a woman—said uneasily, "Now I don't want to hear any more. You have the grisliest job!"

And George was growing impatient.

"What are you playing?" he asked tartly. "Hearts or diamonds?"

"Diamonds."

"Then kindly do so. You're not watching your cards."

At this moment, the telephone rang in the hall. Since the Detective-Inspector was staring with the blank eyes of an addict at his cards, Mrs. Holloway went to answer it. When she returned, she looked at her husband rather curiously.

"Walter, it's him."

"Who?"

"That priest you were talking about. He wants to speak to you."

The Detective-Inspector muttered. He caught his wife's look. He went into the hall. The three waited at the card-table quietly, looking vacantly at the walls. Then the Detective-Inspector came back. He stood there, looking at them, his vast face bewildered, his jowls beginning to grow half-mottled with rage. Since he could not stand for long with that great weight of his, he dropped into a chair. "By God, he's got a monkey's nerve!" He paused, growing redder. Then he burst out, "What's he snooping at? If he's playing me up——"

"What did he want?"

"He says he's found him."

"Who?"

"The blind man!"

But the Detective-Inspector should not have been so startled. If he had been less vexed by Francis' tenacious questioning, he would have seen that the young priest had gone off as agitated, as profoundly nervous and unsatisfied, as when he had come. Not that it would have worried the Detective-Inspector. He would have observed strongly that he had a man-sized job on his hands—he had enough to do without

acting as information bureau to nosey-parkers who should be minding jobs of their own. (On which Mrs. Holloway would have pounced as being very rude: really, Walter, that's no way to talk about one of God's priests!) Well, it would have fortified the Detective-Inspector's resolution—he made it while Francis was there—that next time well-meaning visitors came along with letters of introduction, whether from the Assistant Commissioner or a High Court Judge, he'd make it a point to be out on a case; in future, the sergeants at the desk could fob the snoopers off.

But when Francis left the Detective-Inspector, he could not be so complacent. He had got himself into a highly-charged state. He might have smiled uneasily, but he would not have disagreed with the Detective-Inspector's opinion that he was a haunted visionary who would worry and worry at a thing until he tore somebody's nerves to shreds. He felt something like the first symptoms of a fever. It pursued him. It had begun to interfere with his sleep.

And now he had it all. A case-history: a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. And what end could have been more conclusive? It had the utter finality of death. Yet it remained purposeless. It had no meaning. There was in it nothing to satisfy the cynic, nor console the meek. It was a bitter jest, and an empty one. It taunted one with the mockery and futility of life. There it was: Father Chandler's fabric, the fabric of Tino Orsini's life, in which Francis had seen woven the last few threads. But now that it was revealed, the pattern was still confused. It had the colours of humanity, some tender, some harsh—passion and violence swarmed through it with lurid strands: but it was the pattern made by a fool. It beckoned and derided; it would never content. Woven into it was a mystery. Something was missing. Francis was sure.

It was something he would never know. There was no one to tell Francis anything more.

He busied himself all the following afternoon, making arrangements for his passage home. He made a beginning of packing. He had to end this obsession. Frankly, it could drive him mad. Last night he had dreamed of a dark mobile face

that sought to speak out of shadows deeper than night; he saw the lips move, and because, despairingly, he could not hear, the face smiled sadly; and its lips continued to move. Francis woke with a falling sensation and his pyjamas soiled with sweat. His whole system had been over-stimulated. Indeed, it was high time to go home. So he arranged to see Father Chandler to make his farewell. And although Father Chandler pressed him to dine, he evaded the invitation. He had an instinct to spend the evening alone. To-morrow he would visit the Orsinis and say good-bye. He had interfered as fruitlessly in their lives as he had disrupted his own. In the early evening he had dinner at a small restaurant on the fringe of Soho, and because the night air was sharp and bracing, the sky lit with stars, he walked slowly back to his hotel. He took a turn round the streets, deep in thought, and was only aroused to the neighbourhood by the pungent smells that assailed his nostrils. The salami, the restaurant odours; he was in the Italian quarter. He found that he was in Greek Street; and having paused at a corner, he now experienced a vivid and distasteful shock when he saw that the narrow thoroughfare that crossed it was Alexandra Street. Hitherto, he had shrunk from going near it. Its grim associations made him recoil. But he gazed down it. It was darker and narrower than the garishly lit Greek Street; he could make out a few dimly lit shop windows, the disheartened glow of a shabby restaurant sign and the black massy shape of a high-storeyed dwelling block far down the street. Then it came to him with an odd sensation that he was probably looking at the tenements in which Sarah Linden had lost her life.

He moved slowly down the street. It grew quiet, away from the rush of traffic. The street lamps were pale. The gas in them popped fitfully and the yellow light of the mantles did not extend very far. The shops had begun to close, and the two restaurants he passed looked empty; behind the net curtains one saw idle waiters chatting disconsolately. Francis recollected the number of the tenements: eleven. And when he came to the block of dwellings, he stood outside, staring at it with mixed feelings, conquering a reluctant instinct to go up

the dimly lit stone stairs. It was a dingy block. It rose high into the sky, the little windows lit, yet without the friendliness that so many individual homes should have given to it; a square, granite-faced building that of a sudden seemed to him to breathe distaste.

Near where he was now standing, Mr. Higgins' taxi had pulled up on that fateful night and Tino had got out. Just inside the hall, that faded little gentlewoman, Mrs. Tarrant, had come upon him on her way to the 'Red Cockatoo' and had directed him up the stairs to where Sarah lived. Francis stared on high. Somewhere behind that cold stone front, on the fifth floor, Mrs. Moroni had seen the struggling figures; behind that grim-looking block, in the courtyard, her scream had rung frenziedly into the night air. It was hard to think that the actors who had chiefly motivated the tragedy were now dead; it had not taken long for Tino to follow Sarah, whom he had once so loved. The building seemed to tower forbiddingly: now Francis knew what it meant when one said that something had *the wrong shape*. He detested it. Then, because he felt tired, for he had walked farther than he knew, he saw across the street a small café, brightly aglow, and he crossed to it. It seemed to be French. He caught above it the name, *Madame Antoinette*. It was clean and tasteful. There was a pleasant smell of coffee bubbling in an urn, and behind it were ranged many bottles of wine. Francis went in and sat.

From the *patronne*, who stood behind the bar, he ordered a glass of wine. She was a plump woman with carefully waved grey hair and an amiable manner. She had the ageless unlined face—with that suggestion of departed *chic*—that so many Frenchwomen have. As he drank his wine, Francis saw her studying him with bright attentive eyes and, since the café was empty but for him, he beckoned to her with a smile to drink a glass with him. She called for her son, a young man, to take care of the bar and, wiping her hands on her apron, filled a glass and came round to Francis' table and sat.

They made their salutations.

"Business, you perceive, does not rush one off one's feet. Have I seen you here before?" she asked.

"No. I was passing."

"*Eh bien*, it's pleasant to have someone to talk to. One grows tired of one's own company after a while."

They chatted desultorily. She was an observant woman, and witty, and she made him smile with her gossip about the inhabitants of the district ("one takes them as one finds them, but I have seen better around Place Pigalle!")—and the vagaries of the café trade ("they have not the habit in this strange country, they do not appreciate a fine glass of wine: now in Paris I should have a bar full of men and women, there would be some wonderful talk, it would, how you say, be effervescent with vitality; but here, *hélas*, it is a snatched cup of coffee or a pint of flat beer at the public-house down the street! Barbarians," she sighed.) Then suddenly, it occurred to Francis to draw her to the subject that had brought him down the street. She wasn't slow to talk of it.

"A fearful affair. You remember it? There," she pointed across to the tenements, "that was where it happened! I knew the girl."

Francis pricked up his ears.

"Sarah Linden?"

She, too, looked surprised.

"You knew her?"

It seemed to Francis that he had better tell her who he was. He related in a few brief words his connection with Tino and noted that her eyes only sparkled with interest—and not with uneasiness—when he mentioned that it was he who had performed the last office for him.

"I saw his pictures. He did not look the cruel type I should have thought."

"I assure you, he was not."

"So young. She, too. I will tell you, Father, she also did not deserve her unhappy end."

And then she settled down to talk of Sarah. Because she was French, Sarah had come into the café frequently to chat with Madame Antoinette. It was a great pleasure to Sarah to share with someone the tongue she best enjoyed. "She was a true Parisienne, Father. Her eyes shone as we talked of Mont-

martre, of the Tuileries, and the little cafés both of us knew in the Rue St. Honoré! She spoke of them as one speaks of a departed lover, with tears in her voice. She had that appearance, that exquisite trimness, that style which marks every girl who is born within sight of the Seine! You will gather, will you not, that I took to her? I did. And where is she now?" Madame Antoinette, somewhat moved, yet with the instinctive care of a woman who does not wish to ruin the make-up with which a French matron must hold off the ravaging touch of advancing years, pressed a corner of her handkerchief to her eye. And recovering herself with a sigh, she sipped her Burgundy. Then she looked at Francis scrutinisingly, as if wondering whether she could, with discretion, discuss with him the topic that was on the tip of her tongue. Evidently, perhaps because he was young, she thought she could. She said, "I will tell you something, Father. I think that slowly she was going mad. She was in the grip of the most terrifying passion a woman can know."

"Terrifying?"

"Because it was returned with contempt."

"Did she say so?"

"Never. But I have eyes. And here and there, one gathered a word."

Francis stared at her.

"Who was the man?"

Then Madame Antoinette laughed mockingly. "It was not the young man who died for her. Of that I am sure!"

And with a shrewd, if slightly garrulous, relish Madame Antoinette prepared to tell Francis why. She was a woman of the world. Didn't she know something of love? With glittering eyes she derided it. But as for Sarah and this unfortunate Tino: you had only to think of them. She was as lovely and elusive as a young earth goddess. And he—a handsome boy, ardent and affectionate from the look of him. "Do you think two young people like that could produce such agony and frustration as she must have known? Never! With them, it was as natural as the way a bee drinks from a flower. Never such a suffocating passion as Sarah had been left with! No,

that was the work of some other man." Listening with attention, Francis drew a picture of a reserved and solitary girl who sat staring at the walls of the café with listless eyes. In one so young, said Madame Antoinette, it was shocking. It was saddening to see. "But, *voyons*, that is love! For myself, Father, I will not say that I have been an angel—but when the time came for me to settle down, I did not choose the young man whose eyes entranced me, whose hair choked my heart when he brushed it against my foolish cheek: no, I found myself a plump, bald-headed *restaurateur* who gave me no excitement but was a good and honest husband, and I have never regretted the choice!"

Then a couple of people came in and Madame Antoinette left to serve them. Francis rose. He paid his bill, nodded to Madame Antoinette and went out of the café. It felt colder than when he had gone in. In the last half hour the street had taken on a more deserted look. The restaurants lower down had closed and their shabby lighted signs were now switched off. Francis looked at the dark shape of the tenement building opposite and half raised his hand. It was a gesture of parting: he would never see it again. It remained now only to shut it and its associations out of his mind. In a few days he would be travelling home and distance, no doubt, would bring relief. Then he was conscious that since he had gone into the café something had been added to the street. The reedy sound of a gramophone, playing at the pavement edge, a stone's throw down, came to his ears. He sought, in the shadows away from the street lamp, to make out the figure of a man, an old man, it seemed, sitting unstirringly on a little stool. The hollow tone of the gramophone was almost lost in the windy spaces of the street. Then a curious sensation came over Francis: he could not at first say what aroused it: it came with so sudden and skin-pricking a surge that his mind was confused. He knew immediately what it was. The gramophone was playing a melody that he placed with a shrinking distaste: it was "*Libiamo*". Its connection with Tino sprang vividly to his mind. He had so absorbed Tino's story that, with an almost overwhelming poignancy, he felt, as it were, a breath from the

past—seeing, in his mind's eye a hot tent, glaringly lit, and, to that same lilting music, tiny figures leaping and darting on wires above . . . Nostalgia! Francis gave a strange protesting noise.

He crossed the street. He approached the figure sitting at the pavement edge. He stood a foot or two off and looked at him. It was an old man; he wore a shabby hat on a grey thatch, his dark face was wrinkled and covered with a silvery stubble. He sat on a canvas stool with the relaxed huddle of age, yet with dignity. His head was bent to the ground. In front of him was a little collapsible table on which the portable gramophone sent its thin lost notes into the air. There was a little pile of records by it and a tray containing some stamped pewter figures of the saints, all barely an inch high, with tiny rings so that they might be suspended from a cord: Saint Anthonys and Christophers, an odd Madonna and Child. They were cheaply made and sprayed with gilt. A tin cup had a few coppers in it.

Francis had approached quietly; yet as he stood there, he was certain that the old man was aware of him. He did not lift his head. He seemed to be immersed in the scratched melody that rose so eerily from the rotating disc. Indeed, his whole posture suggested ears rather than sight; the listening stillness of an animal. Francis leaned down and dropped some coins into the cup. As they rattled, the man lifted his head. His voice was husky: foreign. He smiled. "Thank you."

Francis found himself looking into the pallid eyes of a sightless man.

He did not move. His chest pained him. He asked, "Do you often sit here?"

The old man did not reply. His eyes, of the strange milky hue frequently seen in the blind, were directed mildly, quizzically, at Francis' knees. And though he did not answer Francis' question, he did not appear to resent it. His face was not without a grave good-humour. He sat patiently, cautiously; with so little movement that you felt painfully the intensity with which he lived through the sharpened sense of his ears. Francis leaned down to take his

hand, lifting it to his collar. "I am a priest. Please answer. Do you often sit here?"

"I always sit here."

"Always?"

"Except for the past few weeks. I had an accident. Tonight, thank God, I am back in my place again."

Immediately, Francis went back across the road to the café and as Madame Antoinette lifted her eyes, smilingly surprised to see him again, he drew her to the door. "Do you know that man?"

She peered across the road. She laughed.

"Old Cæsar? Yes. The blind beggar. That's his spot."

"Where has he been?"

"He had a misfortune. Oh, it was pathetic. Somebody smashed his gramophone for him."

"Where?"

"But there. Where he sits. For poor old Cæsar, believe me, it was a tragedy."

"When did it happen?"

Now Francis' expression perturbed her. She leaned back to stare into his face. She was disconcerted. She sought to think. Then her face lighted up as she remembered. "It was the night of the terrible trouble across the road." She pointed at the tenements. "What we were talking about before."

And now, greatly shaken, Francis sighed. He couldn't speak for a moment. He felt that he was on the verge of something he did not dare pursue alone: yet something that must be seized violently, so easily could it be lost. He asked Madame Antoinette if she had a telephone he might use.

"Surely." She pointed behind the bar.

"Please watch him. I don't want him to go away."

She shook her head. "He won't go away. He waits for me to fetch him for his supper when we close."

Francis put through a call to the Detective-Inspector's divisional headquarters. He was told, as he expected, that the Detective-Inspector was not on duty; but he asked for the telephone number of the Detective-Inspector's home. The desk sergeant demurred. The interrogation was obstinate.

Francis insisted. At length, the desk sergeant yielded the number. Madame Antoinette's eyes were on Francis uneasily all the time. When Francis had spoken to the Detective-Inspector, he turned to her with a wry smile.

"Please forgive me. I think it's important. I don't know."

He settled down by the window to wait.

Presently a taxi drew up and the Detective-Inspector climbed out. He came straight into the café. Evidently he knew Madame Antoinette for he nodded to her perfunctorily. He was in no good humour. He addressed Francis curtly:

"Now what the deuce is all this about?"

Francis pointed across the street. The feeble strains of the gramophone drew the Detective-Inspector's eyes; gritty in the night air, the machine made a parody of the gay operatic fragment it played. He stared at the huddled figure on the stool.

"Who's that?"

"They call him old Cæsar."

The Detective-Inspector muttered. He had too much fat to go careering across London at this time of night. He was no longer prepared to respect Francis' cloth. "Is he the blind man you've got a bee in your bonnet about?"

"I think so."

"Well. When did he turn up?"

Francis looked at Madame Antoinette.

"But he has always sat there," she shrugged.

"Rubbish!" (When the Detective-Inspector was annoyed he paid scant heed to courtesy.) "We hung around here long enough over this case. We never set eyes on him."

"Naturally not," said Madame Antoinette tartly. (For with a French matron's insistence on official good manners she, too, was growing somewhat short.) "He had gone away. He had an accident."

"When?"

"It was the night of the——" Madame Antoinette didn't care to use the word "murder": it revolted her. She said instead, "the death of that girl."

"What sort of accident?"

"His gramophone was smashed."

And with this, the Detective-Inspector's face began to grow pink. From his expression, he thought the answer puerile. He stared at Madame Antoinette malevolently. And he seemed about to assail her with his tongue. Then his mouth closed. He looked, all in an instant, glum. It came to Francis then that the man was uneasy. The Detective-Inspector said to Madame Antoinette, "Fetch him across."

She went outside. They watched her bend and speak to the old man on the stool. Presently, he stopped the gramophone and with a deliberation that maddened the Detective-Inspector began to pack his impedimenta, collecting his records with care, folding the table and the stool; the gramophone he slung from his shoulder and the tray with its tiny images around his neck. Francis was fascinated by his deftness; the old man's fingers contrived the complicated assembly of his gear with the surest touch. Then he turned and, with Madame Antoinette's hand on his arm, crossed the street. He tapped his way through the café door with his stick.

"Sit here, Cæsar," said Madame Antoinette kindly.

The old man sat at the table, facing Francis and the Detective-Inspector. There was no one else in the café but Madame Antoinette's young son, and him she beckoned indoors. He went. Madame Antoinette locked the street door and she, too, sat.

Seen in the bright light, the blind man's face had the calm that affliction not infrequently brings. Yet in some strange way his tranquillity was unnerving. For you felt in him a queer sense of timelessness: he had conditioned himself to a life that could be made endurable only by the fixity of habit, and though he knew cold and warmth and rain like any other man, the darkness that had closed around him made one day very much like another—for what did he know of the beauty of Spring buds bursting into leaf, the glowing sky at noon or the wet shine of pavements at night, glittering under the feet of the pedestrians scurrying by? "He has been blind all his life," Madame Antoinette whispered. If old Cæsar heard, he did not

stir. He merely waited. And Francis repressed a yearning to reach out and touch his hand that lay lightly on the images in his tray. His skin was nut-coloured, criss-crossed by a maze of fine lines. His hair, still thick, was iron-grey. He had not removed his hat. Madame Antoinette now did this for him. The Detective-Inspector began:

"I'm a police officer. I'd like to ask you some questions. I'm told you usually sit there across the street."

"Yes."

"But you've been away?"

Old Cæsar's head turned slightly to Madame Antoinette and she touched his arm reassuringly and said, "You must answer."

"I have been away."

"You had some kind of accident, I'm told?"

"My gramophone was broken. It was my livelihood. It was a terrible disaster. I have been begging outside the picture-house queues all these weeks so that I might save up enough money to buy another machine." Cæsar's hands touched the gramophone fondly. "I have a new one. I am back again."

He leaned forward now: towards Francis. It was odd how he sensed him though Francis had not yet made a sound.

"You are the one who spoke to me before. The priest."

"Yes. How do you know?"

The old man laughed and sniffed with his nostrils high in the air.

"I smell."

Francis glanced at Madame Antoinette.

"Does he know about——?" He beckoned with his head towards the tenements across the street. She looked startled. She threw Cæsar a sharp uncertain glance.

"I don't know. How should he? We haven't seen him for weeks. Who would tell him?"

But she touched Cæsar's hand.

"Cæsar, the tenements. Did you hear what happened there?"

"No."

"Nothing about the girl?"

"What girl?"

"A girl died. You don't know? Nobody told you?"

"Nobody told me."

She whispered to Francis.

"It is terrible. He lives in a world as dark and lonely as a tomb. He has nobody. No, you can see for yourself, he does not even know."

Francis stared inquiringly at the Detective-Inspector, who still looked morosely uneasy; and as he nodded assent, said, "Cæsar, the night of your accident, did anything happen that you can call to mind?"

"No."

"Perhaps someone spoke to you?"

"Many people speak to me."

"There's nothing that you remember?"

"I lost my gramophone."

"And that was all?"

The blind man smiled bleakly. For him, it had been very nearly as catastrophic as the hand of death. He could starve without it. He shrugged without rancour and repeated, "That was all."

Francis' mouth was dry. He felt impeded. Then he had a thought. He pressed Cæsar's arm.

"That music you played before—you remember?"

"'*Libiamo*'? Oh, yes."

"It meant something to me. Perhaps it meant something to someone else that night?"

Cæsar was silent. The pallid eyes were blank: and Francis sighed. Then Cæsar's mouth widened. Huskily, affectionately, he chuckled.

"Of course. The boy."

Francis' heart leapt.

"What boy?"

"One boy is like another. But him I remember well."

Madame Antoinette had poured out for him a glass of wine and the blind man drank. She nudged him, "Tell them, Cæsar." He began,

"Yes, it was that same night. I had been sitting in my place, there across the street, when a taxi drives up. Someone

gets out. I hear a young man's voice. The taxi drives off."

But the Detective-Inspector interrupted:

"You wouldn't know the time?"

"It wanted perhaps half an hour for Madame Antoinette to fetch me to supper."

Madame Antoinette whispered, "That would be about half-past eight."

"Near enough," said the Detective-Inspector gruffly. "I daresay it was him." He was referring to Tino. Cæsar went on:

"I am playing that record, '*Libiamo*'. Then I am conscious that someone is standing near me, very quietly, listening. And I hear this young man laugh. It is—how should I say?—a happy laugh: all for himself. Well, it is nice to share one's pleasures. So I say to him, 'Do you like my music?' He answers, 'Yes.' 'Do you know it?' I ask. 'I should,' he tells me. And again he laughs, perhaps with more sadness this time—I do not know. 'Yes, I have lived with it for a long time,' he says. So we listen to it together. It is a pleasant moment. I do not play my music only for the money that comes into my cup. When it is finished he bends to me and puts something into my cup. I feel money, a note. Was it necessary? Because it gave him such pleasure, I would have played it for him again and again! A young man with good feelings, I think."

The Detective-Inspector's mouth had fallen open. Francis turned to him with a strange smile.

"Yes, that was Tino."

"What the devil's this '*Libiamo*'?"

"It was the music Tino did his circus act to. It must have brought back odd memories—standing there listening to it in that dark street. Like an old friend coming out of the past."

The Detective-Inspector looked down. "Tell him to go on."

Madame Antoinette touched Cæsar to continue, "Then he is going. I call after him, 'Wait! Take one of the saints.' I give him a Saint Christopher." The blind man's fingers ran delicately over his tray and sought for one of the little images. He held it up: the saint with his burden. " 'Take it,' I tell him. 'He is lucky. Maybe he will carry you when you need him,' I say. He laughs and takes it. He goes."

"Where?"

"Into the building. The tenements."

"Well, it fits," muttered the Detective-Inspector. "But it doesn't bear out more than we already know."

Cæsar continued. His face had begun to stir with kindliness: he was living blandly with his thoughts.

"Then, perhaps ten, eleven, minutes later, he comes back——"

He went no further for the Detective-Inspector burst out with an outraged cry, "What are you talking about?"

"It was him."

"Ten—eleven—minutes? Choose your words! How the devil would you know how long he'd been?"

Cæsar gave a secret smile. He touched his gramophone case.

"Three records. I have played them too long not to know how much time that was."

The Detective-Inspector's face was suffused. Francis, his own heart beating with the sense of something impending, had never in his life seen so tempestuous a flurry of rage. Cæsar was not perturbed. He did not turn his face to the Detective-Inspector's, thrust with such choler at him. He merely went on gently, "Three records later. Ten, eleven minutes. No more. He is back. He is standing again near my side."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing."

"Then how do you know it was him?"

Again Cæsar smiled. He lifted his nostrils.

"I smell."

"Great God—" began the Detective-Inspector in a suffocated voice. Francis pressed his fingers; he fell into silence.

"And then, Cæsar?"

"He goes away. I sit there. Perhaps ten minutes more." His sly little chuckle was intended for the Detective-Inspector. "Three more records," he said. "Then the church clock strikes. It is nine o'clock. I know that soon Madame Antoinette will come to fetch me to supper. Then the disaster happens. It comes like a blow in the face from God." Cæsar's habitual

serenity now fell away from him. His voice rose, inflamed and turbulent. His blank eyes stared, recollecting it with horror. He cried shrilly, "I hear a man come hurrying past me with a stick—a crutch—it catches my gramophone and knocks it flying to the ground. I hear it break. My records are smashed." The atrocity was still raw, he could not contemplate it without a sense of outrage. "I call after him in a great rage, 'Come back, come back,' but he goes running on. Him with his crutch." Cæsar had risen to his feet and he stood there, miming the poignancy of his distress as it returned to him. Then his voice sank. "I stand there, crying, tears running down my face. I pick up my gramophone. The bits of my records. All finished. It is my livelihood. I am lost without them."

They could not have interrupted him if they had tried. Cæsar concluded with a sigh:

"All these weeks I have stood like a beggar outside the queues. Outside the picture-houses. There is no dignity in begging with a hat and giving nothing in return. I have suffered humiliation. So long it has taken me to save my money to buy a new machine. Well, that is what happened. Now I am back."

The Detective-Inspector said harshly to Madame Antoinette, "Didn't you know?"

She shrank.

"I thought it was one of the crowd in the street who did it. They all gathered after that business in the tenements."

But Francis' mouth twisted. He looked from the Detective-Inspector's plump quivering features, mottled with anger, to Madame Antoinette's shocked bewilderment: to the feeble sorrow, so personal and isolated, on the blind man's face. He was surprised by the inadequacy of his emotion. He knew now that, in his heart, he had expected something like this. And there crept over him a wry sense of disillusionment; as if there had been played on him an unsavoury joke. Who was now laughing? God? He felt stony. But the Detective-Inspector was livid. He turned on Cæsar. "There was a murder! Don't you understand? It was criminal. You must have known. The papers were full of it——" Then he looked into the void

flaccid eyes, realising the foolishness of what he was saying, and controlled his voice.

"It's fantastic. I can't accept stuff like that! It's a rigmarole. A lot of hearing—and smelling! Nothing concrete. What am I to do with it? It's monstrous." He struggled. "I don't know what's in it. It's so flimsy. But defending counsel could have made something of it. He had so little. It might have helped. Wicked, wicked! The chap's dead. Hanged. You don't realise the enormity——"

He sighed. He wiped his face.

"You've got to see how thin it is yourself."

Francis said mockingly, "The man with the crutch? A coincidence?"

"It'll be looked into."

"But you're afraid of what you might find?"

The Detective-Inspector looked at him hauntedly. His small rosy mouth was pursed.

"We'll see."

He said to Madame Antoinette sullenly, "Do you know where this chap lives?" He pointed to Cæsar.

"Yes."

"Write it down."

She did so on the back of a bill.

"We'll want a fuller statement from him. To-morrow will do."

Then Francis took from the blind man's fingers the little Saint Christopher he still held. He dropped a coin into the cup.

"There's something I want to go and see."

With the Detective-Inspector he went out into the street.

"Do you know where Mrs. Orsini lives?"

"The wife?" The Detective-Inspector stole a look at him. "Yes."

They found a taxi and the Detective-Inspector gave the driver the address. It wasn't very far. The apartment was over a shop. They climbed the stairs and rang. The building was airless; on the banisters, listlessly, some children played. Judith came to the door. She said nothing, looking at Francis expectantly; she did not smile, he knew that his face was

strained; but her eyes widened. And at the Detective-Inspector she shot an inscrutable glance.

"Come in."

They entered. She whispered, "The baby's sleeping." Her face had grown shaken; she knew not what to expect. Her sudden pallor made her fair hair, unbound for bed, look silvery. Francis held out his hand. She looked at the little gilt image in his palm.

She said, "That's Tino's."

The Detective-Inspector asked, "D'you know where he got it?"

"No. I found it—later—amongst his things."

"P'raps you'd be good enough to see."

She beckoned them quietly into the bedroom. A tiny night-light burned; the child slept in its cot. Judith pulled open a dressing-table drawer and searched. She found a collar box and rummaged with shaking fingers amongst the studs and buttons that lay in it. Then her mouth opened inquiringly, uneasily; she took out a little Saint Christopher, the twin of that which lay in Francis' hand, and looked from one to the other, perturbed. At once, she guessed. It was a strange instinct that turned her head instantly to the child. The Detective-Inspector took the little figure from her, making a deflated sound.

"We'll have to go into it."

Judith trembled. And then she said something that made the Detective-Inspector wince.

"How far will you go? As far as Tino?" she asked.

AND THE GUILTY

Two days later, they travelled to Paris. When Francis insisted on going with him, the Detective-Inspector did not dissuade him. Neither did he make him welcome. He was in a taciturn mood. Francis had an idea that there had been many conferences on a higher level than that on which the Detective-Inspector normally moved. And when, at last, the corpulent police-officer relaxed a little on the boat, he let fall that the Assistant Commissioner had consulted the judge who had tried the case and that the Home Office had been brought into it at once. He himself had had an uncomfortable session with the Law Officers of the Crown. Eh? He wouldn't forget it. No, not in a hurry, by George!

And the Detective-Inspector's huge face grew to look quite wan. He sought to keep up his spirits by saying that he wasn't convinced by a long chalk—he still thought they'd find all this business of the blind man a mare's nest: so much moonshine: he muttered, "Nothing but smelling—and hearing! What's there to get hold of?" He had had the nastiest shock.

"Makes my own position so invidious." As the train drew near Paris he sighed, "Twenty-five years service." A real fear for his pension had got into his bones.

When they arrived, they took a taxi at once to a police station near the Place Vendôme. They were shown into the *Commissaire de Police* with despatch. He greeted his British opposite number with warmth, and he eyed Francis with a curiosity he made no effort to conceal. Then he beckoned them briskly to chairs. He was a short swarthy man—a Breton—with a brown ebullient face and sharp black eyes. He was well-dressed. He looked less like a police official than one of the

loungers who, with an eye to the main chance, you might expect to see hovering elegantly in the bars in the vicinity of the Ritz. But he was not a man Francis would underestimate; he imagined that, on occasion, the keen swarthy face could look exceedingly cruel.

Since neither the Detective-Inspector nor Francis spoke French, the *Commissaire* accommodated them with his English. His accent was florid and vile.

"Now let us see how we can assist you, *Monsieur le Detective*. Proceed!"

He listened intently to the Detective-Inspector's story; and now and again his stare went oddly to Francis. He did not seem to be put out by what he heard. If anything, he looked intrigued. You would have thought it was something to which he could match his agile wits. When the Detective-Inspector had finished, his black eyes glowed and he cried, "A strange story! I have heard nothing like it. *Eh, bien!* If there is something in it, it will not take us long to dig it out."

He called into the next office for a dossier and, when it was brought to him, studied it at length. He looked up apologetically and shrugged. "Naturally, when you asked us to check the movements of this man, Ribble, we treated it as a routine inquiry. No more. I sent an *agent* to investigate. You have seen the statement he obtained for you? It was made by a waiter who serves in the night-club in which Ribble is employed."

Emphatically, he pressed a highly-polished pink finger-nail on the document in question.

"On the night you wished us to check for you, this waiter states that from eight-thirty to midnight Ribble was serving drinks behind the bar. There was no reason to doubt it. Now you have cause to suspect that Ribble was in London that night?" He chuckled softly. "*Zut!* It will be interesting to see how a man can be in two places at once!"

He spoke into his telephone and in a few moments an *agent* in plain clothes came in. He was young. "This is the man who interviewed the waiter," the *Commissaire* said. He spoke to the *agent* authoritatively in French. The *agent* frowned and, with a

flood of explanation, pointed to the statement he had obtained. When the *Commissaire's* voice grew harsh, he flushed. He looked disconcerted. Finally, with a jerk of his head, the *Commissaire* beckoned him out.

"One cannot put old heads on young shoulders," he said. "He is not a student of human nature. Now if I had interviewed this waiter, I should very soon know whether he was lying or not."

Then he sat back. He rubbed his hands.

"Your tale, *Monsieur le Detective*, is quite fantastic. A blind man with only ears—and a nose," he chuckled, "is no satisfactory witness, you understand. But to me the story has a credible ring. I have an instinct about such things. It is preposterous. No? But its very extravagance provokes me. It stimulates me!" (The Detective-Inspector looked morose. He found his French associate's detachment not so amusing.) "I think we shall find something for you. Come. I have a car. Let us go and see what we can find out."

With which, the *Commissaire* picked up a pair of natty lemon-coloured gloves and placed a bowler hat on his head. He grew chatty. He called attention to his *chapeau melon* as he led them to the car. The style was now, in Paris, very much the rage. *Très Anglais!* He asked Francis if he had visited Paris before. No? Then he must certainly stay a few days and see the Notre Dame. He should hear Mass at St. Eustache. He, the *Commissaire*, was not a religious man, but he had been told that not even a hardened agnostic could fail to be impressed. Francis smiled faintly and said that in forty-eight hours he would be on his way home. So? A pity! The *Commissaire* then transferred his attention to the Detective-Inspector, whom he assumed would be interested in more mundane things. He rattled on invitingly about a new cabaret where they had the latest American jazz instrumentalists—specialists in *le hot*. The *Commissaire's* eyes sparkled. He was a man who liked the bright lights and the company of pretty women. The Detective-Inspector looked sour. He was a respectable married man and he would have thought that one look at his huge figure would have told anyone that he was not

built for dancing to *le hot*. But the *Commissaire's* affable tongue wagged on. Then the car turned into a dingy street off the Place Pigalle and drew up outside a night-club. They stared at it from the car. It was garishly decorated outside with a steel and glass figure of a negro bar-tender, but in the bright light of day it had a sordid look. The street was littered with the vegetable refuse of a market and impregnated with its smell. They got out of the car. The *Commissaire* hesitated now. He looked at Francis.

"Perhaps you would prefer to wait here."

"Why?"

There was a cynical expression in the *Commissaire's* eyes.

"I don't think it will be a very edifying business."

Francis looked down. He said stubbornly:

"No. I've followed this a long way. I want to see the end of it."

"As you prefer."

They went inside. Three or four men, presumably waiters, were sweeping up, cigarettes dangling from their mouths. In the corner a cleaner crouched tiredly on her knees and swabbed the floor. It smelled of stale smoke and indifferent liquor. There was a long bar, lit by fluorescent lights, with a chromium rail and tubular stools. The murals were nudes: and blatantly vicious. The *Commissaire's* eyes twinkled as he glanced at Francis. But when the place was discreetly lit, it would not be so obvious that the ceiling peeled and that the woodwork was rankly varnished. It was not a resort that would be patronised by Parisians—it catered for American and English tourists; it would have its touts around the Opera at night, and no doubt, when it grew dark, a tiny band would clamour harshly on the dais. Then, imprudent visitors would be rooked for the cheap bourbon and synthetic cocktails with which they would be poisoned. There would be a few "*commerçantes* of the house"—ladies of joy—and young students from Missouri would think they were seeing the very heck of a life. It made the *Commissaire's* nose wrinkle with disgust.

He called over a waiter and spoke to him. The man pointed. Another waiter in the corner saw the gesture in his direction

and looked up. His mouth fell open nervously. Of a sudden, his eyes darted about. He was a thin hollow-chested creature with a pointed nose. He pretended uneasily to be concerned with his work. Coolly, the *Commissaire* studied him.

"A rat," he said mildly. "Well, we'll soon find a way to make him open his *margoulette*." (His trap, so Francis understood.)

They went across.

"Jacques Benois?"

"Yes?"

"I am a *Commissaire de Police*. Be good enough to sit. I wish to examine you."

The *Commissaire* waved to the other waiters to continue their sweeping out of earshot. Then, pleasantly, he smiled.

"Benois, this gentleman"—he indicated the Detective-Inspector—"is a British detective. I am pursuing an inquiry on his behalf. Do you understand English?"

"A little."

"Then speak it so that he may understand." The *Commissaire's* tone was friendly, it would not have affrighted most people; but the thin waiter shrank. The *Commissaire* removed his elegant yellow gloves and said, "There is a man employed here, an Irishman, named Ribble. Has he arrived yet?"

"No. He does not come until a little later in the afternoon."

"He is a friend of yours?"

"An acquaintance."

"Now, Benois. You will recall a statement you made to one of my *agents*. You said that"—the *Commissaire* drew out the statement and idly checked it—"on the night of January the ninth, this man Ribble was with you, serving at the bar. You remember?"

"It was the truth."

"You do not wish to retract it?"

The man licked his lips.

"No."

"Well, we have ample evidence that this man, Ribble, was not in Paris that night, but in London. What would you say to that?"

"No, no. I swear to you, he was here."

"In the flesh?" mocked the *Commissaire*. "Behind that bar?"

"I told you."

"You know what I think?"

"What, *M'sieu le Commissaire*?"

"I think you are lying, my friend."

The man could not take his terrified eyes off the *Commissaire's* affably indolent face.

"I give you my oath. It is the truth."

"Come." The *Commissaire* glowed intimately, with benevolence. "You cannot pull wool over my eyes. We know. This business is serious. It concerns a murder. I will be even franker. An innocent man has already paid for it with his life. Do you realise what the punishment is for making a false statement?"

The man did not answer.

The *Commissaire* sighed. He returned the document to his pocket. Then he looked at Benois narrowly and made what Francis thought was a shot in the dark.

"You have had trouble with the police before. You have a prison record."

The man got up convulsively. The *Commissaire* smiled cruelly. He was delighted with his shrewdness. Now he looked content.

"Out with it, Benois."

"Let me alone."

At once, the *Commissaire* took hold of the waiter's coat with one hand, and with the other smacked him viciously across the face. As the man uttered a frightened moan, the *Commissaire*, with all his strength, beat the back of his hand again across his mouth.

"Speak!"

The Detective-Inspector got up. He was shocked. This sort of thing did not accord with the British system of interrogation, with the rights and privileges granted a suspect under judge's rules. It revolted him. He said nothing, but his face went very red. Francis got up and moved over to the bar, turning his back. He felt ashamed.

He heard the scurrying of feet as if the waiter were struggling, then the sound of further brutal smacks. He winced. At length, the man cried out in a hoarse voice. He began to speak rapidly in French. Presently, Francis heard the *Commissaire* mutter to the Detective-Inspector, "Now we have got it. The *canaille* has admitted that he lied. He says that this man Ribble terrified him. The Irishman has a very aggressive personality. He told this animal what to say."

The Detective-Inspector questioned the waiter in a low voice. Chastened, the shrunken creature answered him. There was a tapping sound on the floor and a man came in, approached the bar and, leaning on a crutch, took off his coat and hung it in a closet behind the bar. He slipped on a bartender's white jacket. His hair was red. A strange sensation passed through Francis: he tautened. He felt a sudden tremor of familiarity. It was as if he were meeting an old friend, one whom he had known intimately only through other people's mouths but who had, at last, materialised out of the past. So this was Mike! Francis' pulse quickened. The man looked at him indifferently, then gave him a second, more curious, look as he saw Francis' garb. He would not have expected to see a priest in a place like this. And a caustic smile touched his lips. Francis stared at him. He was much as he had appeared in the photograph he had had taken in the circus with Tino and Sarah, but his colouring was more vivid than the picture would have led you to believe. He was gaunter. Francis could not tell whether it was the fiery colour of his hair that gave his skin that deathly pallor so that every freckle stood out. And his face seemed sunken to the very bone. Haunted, thought Francis: not a man who sleeps. He watched Mike's thin sinewy hands, so beautifully shaped, covered with their fine red down, wipe clean the bar.

So this was the man he had come so far to see. . . . This was the man with whom Tino had moved so happily through France, performing in such comradeship, high up in an odorous circus tent, their fantastic act. This was the man who, when Sarah had come into their lives, must have guessed that, with the inevitability of a Greek tragedy, the three would be

drawn into an act more dreadful and fantastic still. They were tied together. Tino and Sarah had gone; and, looking at the Irishman's haggard face, it seemed to Francis that it would not be long before Mike, too, was gone. A violent personality; yet one that drew out of you a strange pity. He looked at Mike's mouth. What had Rosa once said to Tino? "My poor boy. Can you not see that your friend is a very sensual man?" . . . And that nostalgic feeling, as though he had merged himself too painfully in their tormented story, sharing with them their vagabondish lives, swept once more over Francis. How this business had consumed him! He felt enervated. Well, it was not far off the end.

He saw now that Mike had grown very still and was staring intently at the *Commissaire* and the Detective-Inspector in the corner with the waiter. He looked at Francis.

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, thank you."

"Are those friends of yours?"

"They came with me."

Mike darted another oblique glance at the group in the corner.

"Police?"

"Yes."

Mike said nothing more. But he turned and, while busying himself with some bottles, watched the *Commissaire* and the Detective-Inspector covertly in the mirror behind the bar. He met Francis' eyes in the glass. Strangely, he studied him.

The *Commissaire* and the Detective-Inspector had now finished with the waiter. They came over. The *Commissaire* addressed Mike sharply.

"Your name is Ribble?"

"Yes."

"I am a *Commissaire de Police*. You were once connected with a young woman named Sarah Linden."

"Was I?"

"Be good enough to answer my questions. You lived with her, did you not?"

"If you say so."

"We have just interrogated that *salaud* over there"—the *Commissaire* indicated the waiter who still sat in the corner, shrunken—"regarding a statement he made as to your movements on the night of the young woman's murder, January the ninth."

"What's that to me?"

"He said that you were serving here at the time. He has now admitted that he lied."

Mike's eyes were mocking.

"I'm not surprised. I always said you couldn't trust him from here to the end of the bar."

"I advise you to be serious. He says that you forced him to make a false statement."

"Did he?"

"We know that in fact you were in London that night. Well? What have you to say?"

"Not a blasted thing."

The *Commissaire* adopted his air of bluff *bonhomie*. It was the confiding chuckle of a well-wisher who thinks that an amusing jest has gone quite far enough.

"Come! It is no use! Once we put our minds to it, it will not be difficult to discover how you travelled to London. It is all over now. You may as well be frank."

"Go to hell."

The *Commissaire's* mouth tightened.

"This gentleman is a British detective. He has reason to suspect you of Sarah Linden's death."

"I don't know anything about it."

"You are lying."

"Then don't waste your breath."

The Detective-Inspector asked sternly, "Are you willing to return with me to London to answer certain questions?"

"No, I'm not."

The *Commissaire*, with an ugly look at Mike, said, "You are not a French citizen. You will receive no assistance from us. This is murder. A warrant for your extradition will be served and it will be complied with. You will be well advised to return with the Detective-Inspector without fuss."

"He can go to the devil. When he wants me he knows where to find me. I shan't run away."

The *Commissaire* said coolly, "Be assured, I shall see to that."

But Mike had already dismissed them. For some moments he had been staring at Francis inscrutably. He was puzzled. Abruptly, he pointed.

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Can you not guess?" cried the *Commissaire*.

"No, damn you, I can't!"

With a flourish that no doubt appealed to his Gallic sense of melodrama, the *Commissaire* said, "He was in the death cell with the unhappy young man who paid for your crime."

Now Mike might have been made of stone.

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

A flush crept into Mike's cheeks. After an appreciable pause, he asked:

"How was he?"

Francis said, "I don't think you'd have been ashamed of him. He always had courage. You ought to know."

Mike looked down. He smiled faintly.

"Yes. He was all right. There was nothing wrong with Tino."

"Then why did you let him die?"

And here, Francis felt the Detective-Inspector give a spasmodic heave. (Upon his soul—really!—if an interrogation was to be carried out it had to be done by police officers in proper surroundings, and after a formal caution: this sort of thing was all wrong.) But the *Commissaire* pressed his arm, motioning him to silence. For the *Commissaire's* eyes were glowing. He was intrigued. He was a man of subtlety and feeling, he had a Frenchman's instinct for the unusual, and he had an idea that something was impending it would be a pity to miss. Mike had transferred the whole of his attention to Francis. The others might never have been there. And his lips widened tormentedly as he chuckled.

"Who said I did?"

"Mike——" Francis stumbled. He sought for words. He knew that, keenly, the Detective-Inspector and the *Commissaire* were staring at him. How could he tell them that because he had believed in rightness and mercy, because they had been so derided, they had ceased to mean anything to him: and that the bottom had fallen out of his world? Perhaps Mike sensed his agitation. His curious eyes were compassionate. Strange! They understood each other. Like Mike, he felt the two of them to be isolated—the *Commissaire* and the Detective-Inspector no longer belonged, they were to be brushed aside. And then he had a peculiar feeling. It was that Tino and Sarah were behind him, peering over his elbow: and behind them, crowding silently out of the shadows, were Judith and the Orsinis—Mr. Orsini's face blank with no understanding, Mrs. Orsini's craggy features keen with anger because no one could tell her why. With the tiniest shiver, Francis began,

"It's I who brought these men here. I'm sorry. I made a great mistake. I told the *Commissaire* before I'd followed this a long way. Well, it's a journey I should never have made. I was very naïve." (Poor Father Chandler would have blanched.) "Well? Where should I have begun? At Marseilles, with the circus? Those were the good times, weren't they? Oh, I know, you and Tino were very happy then. I think that was why you were afraid when the two of you first met Sarah in that dingy music-hall. Did your heart tell you? Perhaps you had an instinct what would happen the moment you set eyes on her." Francis shrugged. "It's an old story now. Like turning over dead leaves in a forest; they've fallen, why stir them? Let them moulder. What was Tino but a leaf that fell? I know now that I should have let him lie. I was foolish: I had to stir the leaves." He met Mike's eyes. "D'you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"I've got a pretty good idea."

Tartly, the Detective-Inspector opened his mouth to speak; and again, softly, the *Commissaire* silenced him. "Be still, my friend."

But Francis looked with pity at Mike's pallid face. Visibly, the man's endurance was leaving him. Who could guess

what he had borne? No, he would not be sorry to get to the end.

Francis went on, "I've often wondered what sort of life you and Sarah had when you ran away. Did you regret it at once? She must have been very sure of her hold on you. Oh, I can feel sorry for her. She was a woman. She was madly in love. Maybe she exulted because she never doubted you belonged to her. But she wasn't very wise. Didn't she guess what sort of man you were? She should have known you could never submit yourself to the slavery of passion. It must have revolted you." He saw Mike's expression sharpen strangely: he gave Francis a rapid glance, then wryly looked down. No, it wasn't hard to imagine what had happened between that oddly-assorted pair! When they got to Paris, probably they'd found some grubby apartment in Neuilly or Montparnasse, and Mike had begun to tout the agencies for the chance of a job. Perhaps he'd done it half-heartedly. He had got used to Tino and, without him, he didn't feel at his best. The spark had gone. The agents shrugged. They didn't bite. So perhaps Sarah found herself a job in one of the cabarets, with her fresh young beauty, her body, it wouldn't have been hard to keep both of them alive. But she didn't care. She was elated. She was blind with love. She didn't realise that, when his desire was quenched, Mike had nothing for her but a smouldering hate. He grew morose. There must have been moments of passion between them, but when they were over he was grim again. Francis could imagine those nights in the shabby apartment, Mike sitting there, still and bitter, for he would not speak to her, and Sarah's heart growing heavy with despair. In the end, she must have seen what he felt. He was fighting her mastery over him—he was only waiting for the time when he could be rid of his intolerable desire: and be master of his soul once more. And then she grew frightened. She knew it would end. It did. At last he was free. He was shut of her. And he threw her off. Francis echoed his thoughts, "When you told her you were leaving her, she must have been distraught. She could have wept and you'd only have laughed in her face. She must have been broken. She didn't know where to turn. Why did she go

to London? Did she feel so lost?" Mike did not stir: he held Francis' eyes with strained attention. "But then you found it wasn't over for you. You hadn't triumphed, after all. Tino was the only one you cared about. You loved him, didn't you? And you'd lost him. You're a strange man. Maybe that comradeship with Tino was the only thing you treasured—that gave some meaning to your solitary life. And you hated Sarah because she'd destroyed it. It must have seethed in your mind until it grew and choked you; like an evil weed." Yes, it was too near the truth: who could doubt it? Mike gave a harsh grin. "You followed her to London. I think that's right?"

Mike would not speak.

Francis shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know what happened then. But I've an idea. I've felt it like a dream—dim and shapeless—something you can't clearly remember: yet still horribly real. I think you were in Alexandra Street that night. Perhaps you saw Tino there. Did you? Perhaps you heard that blind man playing '*Libiamo*'—and then what it must have brought back in a rush to both of you!" And that, too, was the truth. Now Mike's face glistened with sweat. The scene rose darkly before Francis' eyes. The blind man, crouched over his reedy gramophone as it sent into the quiet street the music that was filled with such memories for them both: Mike leaning on his crutch, watching Tino from the shadows across the street with haggard eyes, and Tino, deeply moved, aware of him: and seeing Mike, raising his hand a little helplessly, knowing that everything between them was gone and would never come back. It was a bond too deep to be broken, yet one that could never be restored. "I think you saw each other. I don't know what was in your mind as your eyes met in that dark street. It must have been a terrible moment for both of you. You watched him go up into those tenements. And when he came out, you guessed. You saw his face. It wouldn't have made you hate Sarah any the less. . . . Well, the rest we know. You were the one Mrs. Morini saw up on that balcony. It's not a pretty picture, is it, Mike?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"But that's how it was?"

Mike's face held an unearthly light.

"I shouldn't be surprised."

The *Commissaire's* eyes gleamed. The Detective-Inspector drew in his breath.

"Then why did you let him die?"

Mike wiped his face. He paused. Then he laughed.

"You were right about Tino. He was the only one I ever cared about."

"I know."

"D'you think he'd have thanked me for speaking up? Don't be a damned fool. He wanted me to shut my mouth. He thought he was finished with Sarah. But he wasn't. The moment he saw her he knew he was still in love with her. She was in his bones for good. He'd never be free of her as long as he breathed. He belonged to her. And he knew his marriage was a farce. He'd never be able to look Judith—his kid—in the face again. He'd made a mess of his life. When Sarah died, he died. It was all over for him. He didn't want to live any more."

"And do you?"

Mike looked up quickly. He chuckled.

"I don't give a twopenny damn."

The *Commissaire* said softly, "Enough. Now you had better come with me."

Mike shrugged. He drew off his linen jacket. He limped to the closet behind the bar. The *Commissaire* rose sharply.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my coat."

Mike paused in the doorway, turning to look at Francis. He nodded. Then he leaned inside. Francis bent his head. The fools! Couldn't they see he was slipping out of their fingers? Mike must have been prepared for an eventuality like this. As the *Commissaire* whispered with awe, "Incomprehensible! Out of his own mouth . . ." he got up and went quickly out to the car.

Francis sat in the car for quite a while. Perhaps ten minutes passed. Then he was roused by the intermittent clang of an

ambulance that came shooting round the corner, pulling up outside the bar. Some men got out and went hastily inside. Francis did not move. Presently, the Detective-Inspector came out. He looked pale and startled.

"He's a goner! He's beaten us to it!"

Francis did not answer; and the Detective-Inspector, at a loss for words, went on uneasily. "He must have taken something in the closet. We never had a chance."

Then the *Commissaire* came out. He adjusted his *chapeau melon* carefully on his head and drew on his yellow gloves. He looked grim. He climbed in beside the Detective-Inspector. He touched the chauffeur on the shoulder and told him to drive off.

At length, he gave the Detective-Inspector a sidelong glance.

"Well, it's no bad thing. It will save a lot of trouble. Perhaps there is no need to make a song about it now."

The Detective-Inspector cried, "What d'you mean?"

The *Commissaire* shrugged with indifference.

"It will not be pleasant for you to have to re-open this business. You have executed a man for something he did not do. Can you say to him: we regret the error and here is back your life? I know your English susceptibilities. You are a nation of incorrigible sentimentalists. Your public will rise up as one man and set up a most distressing squawk. Justice! they will cry." The *Commissaire* smiled thinly. "The public is a blockhead. It does not understand that justice is a human institution and that one must not complain if now and again it fails to behave like God. Who will be the better for such a commotion? I should have thought it wiser to let sleeping dogs lie."

"You don't know what you're saying! We couldn't do a thing like that!"

The *Commissaire* said nothing. But he chuckled inwardly at the suffused expression on the Detective-Inspector's face. He thought they managed these things more adroitly in France. Still! It was not his pigeon. Why should he let it spoil his lunch? If this flesh-mountain of a detective chose to start a

witch-hunt, to make a scapegoat of his own police force, it was bewildering but presumably he knew what he was doing. It only went to show that the English, who could lose an army division with complacency yet explode with horror if, by an official mishap, an individual of no importance was deprived of his life, were hypocrites from skin to bone. Then the *Commissaire* glanced at Francis. The young man's face was white and strained. The *Commissaire* stared at him with sympathy. He could sense keenly—like heat—some inner stress. He had an idea that the priest was an ardent enthusiast who had taken too seriously the spiritual background of his trade. Well, he was young. He had ample time to learn! He would learn that, with a little cynicism, even a priest could adjust himself satisfactorily to life. He would learn that man had created God in his own image and that it was not a wise thing to expect more out of a pint-pot than you put in. Then he looked out of the window as the car sped down the Boulevard Haussmann and he saw with affection that the trees were beginning to bloom. He felt like crying: where else but in Paris could you find such a tang of vitality in the air? The little midinettes, scurrying off to lunch, walked with eager steps, gossiping with animation, the market-stall keepers chaffered volubly, and you had the feeling that the city was renewing itself with life. The *Commissaire* beamed. It was Spring! He put *l'affaire Orsini* right out of his mind.

But Francis stared ahead. He had had to dig: and he had dug away the foundations of his life. He felt slightly sick. Tino Orsini was gone and nothing could bring him back. His child would grow up fatherless. His parents had mourned him and his wife had wept. What was it but a tale told by an idiot? They might all have been marionettes, dangled from cruel and capricious hands. Then Francis thought of Mike's face, the last glimpse he had got of it, the man's skin shining with deathly pallor under his red hair. He had gone after Tino and Sarah: what had started at Marseilles was finished and he guessed what it was that the Irishman's mocking eyes, in that last stare, had tried to say: when you looked back on it, it was just as if the three of them had been linked together in a crazy

meaningless dance. It was a story to make the gods laugh. And all Francis knew was this: he had no more faith. He was not fit to be a priest.

Now the car circled the Opera; and the stone figures of the melody-makers were lit by the glowing mist-laden fingers of the sun. The pigeons fluttered. The taxis hooted and darted like gnats. But the Detective-Inspector saw and heard nothing. He sat hunched in gloomy thought. Well, he hadn't much doubt that they could pin the goods on the Irishman—the chap had said enough! Eh? Would you have believed it? What a character! The Detective-Inspector couldn't get out of his blank eyes the vision of the fellow lying there so palely, with his big aggressive nose and his flaming hair, his crutch—pathetically, somehow—kicked out of the way (no, he wouldn't need that again!) He must have had the stuff ready. Before they could put a finger on him he was gone. Well, he might be out of it, but if the Detective-Inspector wasn't damned careful he'd be left holding the bag. He'd have to be quick about passing it on. For what had he done but his duty? God, it was going to be a headache. Now the business would start. A nightmare. And the Detective-Inspector shrank. The trial would have to be reviewed by the High Courts, the whole machinery of the law set in reverse—and when the verdict was quashed, the Home Office would have the unenviable job of offering compensation to the next-of-kin. The sort of thing that couldn't happen but once in a thousand years. (And it had to happen to him!) Once the newspapers got hold of it there'd be no end of a scream, there'd be questions asked in the House, he didn't doubt it, the cranks would get their teeth into it and the societies for reforming this-and-that. . . The Detective-Inspector had, of a sudden, a peculiar idea. He had a feeling that somewhere in the conversation the priest had given the Irishman the hint. Had he? (Something about Ribble's life, and the chap not giving a twopenny damn!) No. He must have imagined it. But he glanced with disfavour at Francis out of the corner of his eye. What was *he* looking so grim about? Burned his fingers, had he? That would teach him to keep them stuck in his own pie next time.

Then the scent of blossom came into the car. . . .

The Detective-Inspector looked out. So this was Paris! By Golly, you had to admit it, there was something about the city that stirred your blood. He didn't care much for the French—cynical lot, no substance to 'em—but you couldn't help feeling they got the devil of a lot of pleasure out of just breathing and walking about. Vivacious! They gave you the sensation that it was good to be alive. He shoved Orsini (who wasn't, anyway—not where he was, in the prison yard) right out of his thoughts. There'd be time to think of him tomorrow. With a bit of luck, he might even end up somewhere in a dusty file. In the meantime, he had half a notion to take up the *Commissaire's* invitation and have a bit of a night out. Naturally, a lot of naked girls capering about a cabaret wasn't really his cup of tea, but a middle-aged chap (he wasn't a day over fifty!) owed it to his education to see what it was like. The Detective-Inspector chuckled. His wife wouldn't believe him if he said he'd spent a night in Paris without having a look at the Folies Bergère. And he wouldn't mind betting that, secretly, she'd think he'd had his spot of fun. Women! Well, was it fantastic? Some girls liked them plump: portly.

Why, his wife always made a point of telling people: "Walter's a fine figure of a man!"

"A Triangle on a Trapeze" is the headline with which a newspaper sub-editor would probably label this story, if the drama of Tino, the trapeze artist, Mike his partner, and Sarah the girl who came between them, had really happened and was "news".

But it would give a misleading idea of this story, which is treated in a most novel and unusual way. To begin with, the author takes us to the cell of the condemned man, where we watch him hour by hour until the end, when the doubt begins to dawn: *Was he really guilty?*

It is a Roman priest present at the execution who pursues the trail of events backwards to the cause of the girl's murder, and the elucidation of the whole drama. We watch the cold drawn face of the prison governor freeze to the very possibility of Tino's innocence; we mix with the pleasant family of Tino in Soho; we follow his circus in Southern France; the trapeze swings, the clowns tumble, the tiger snarls. Here is all that circus atmosphere from which the drama of two men's friendship and one woman's uncontrollable passion rises with a certain inevitability and leads from the swinging rope of the trapeze to that of the hangman.

Indeed, this satisfying story should make the name of Max Catto, who wrote the very successful play *They Walk Alone*, as attractive on a book jacket as upon a theatre poster!

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